VIDEOGAME CULTURE

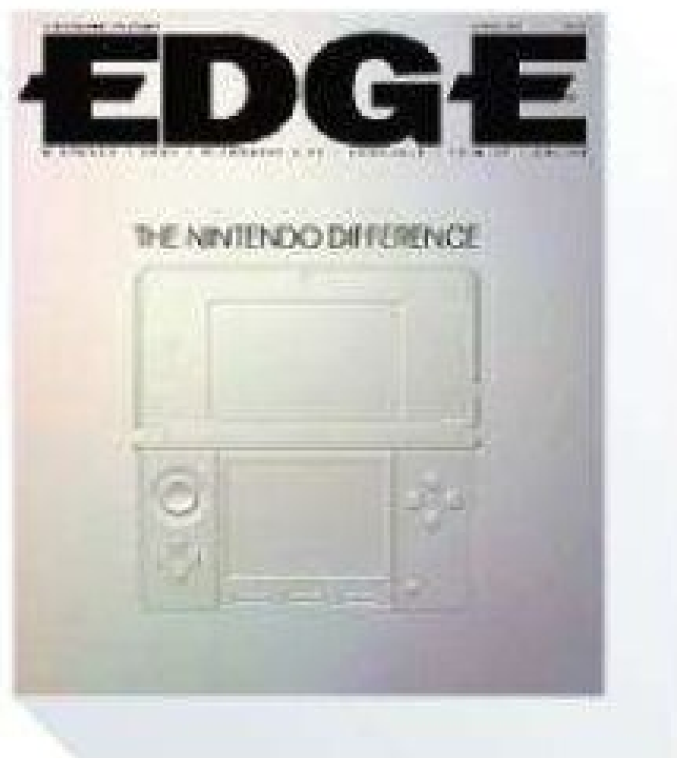
MARCH 2011 £4.50

EDGE®

NINTENDO | SONY | MICROSOFT | PC | HANDHELD | COIN-OP | ONLINE

THE NINTENDO DIFFERENCE





Turning heads hasn't always been at the top of Nintendo's list of priorities. Yes, its N64 hardware packed some of the most astonishing 3D-rendering consumer tech of its day, and there were few Mega Drive owners who didn't wish (usually quite secretly) that their console had a little something called Mode 7, but neither of the company's biggest successes, in the form of Wii and DS, have led their respective markets when it comes to visual fidelity. For a time, in fact, Nintendo couldn't get away from accusations that modelling the guts of its Wii hardware on the architecture that powered its GameCube was anything other than folly. Was it simply giving up on graphics? Had it somehow forgotten that visual advancements were the fundamental building blocks of videogame hardware wars?

The subsequent victories were famously won on different battlefields, and have informed some of the thinking that has gone into the design of Nintendo's 3DS. At the same time, though, here is a console whose visual content offers a bigger wow factor than any other piece of gaming hardware by virtue of its uniqueness. Sony's recently announced NGP may have a sparkling, five-inch OLED display, but, next to a 3DS screen, it is a refinement rather than a reinvention. In reality, the NGP hardware's dual touch-sensitive input is its most daring innovation.

The problem with daring innovations is that they don't always seem convincing at first sight. It wasn't until the arrival of *Nintendogs*, for example, some five months after the DS launch, that Nintendo's vision for the platform seemed to crystallise. (*Wii Sports*, on the other hand, proved to be the best launch – and pack-in – game in history.) How did Sony demonstrate the potential of its new console? By manoeuvring Nathan Drake around an environment by touching areas of the screen as if he was in an iOS game. When game design on a Sony console appears to be informed by Apple, you know that times are changing.

But Apple's iOS cannot be ignored. Its success as a game platform is down to many factors, certainly not least that an iPhone is always with you. If any element has influenced Nintendo, it's this one, with various 3DS features built around what can happen when you take your console out into the wild, from interacting and sharing with other users to tracking how much walking you've done today. As for us, we'll be slumped over here playing *Ocarina Of Time* as it's never been played before.



Autodesk Games Insight

The Latest Scoop from Autodesk Media & Entertainment



***Deus Ex: Human Revolution*™. Image courtesy of Eidos-Montreal.**

Eidos-Montreal uses Autodesk software to help revitalize the *Deus Ex* franchise with the *Human Revolution* prequel.

Summary

When *Deus Ex*, a combination of a first-person shooter and a role-playing video game first appeared in 2000, it was already 2050 in the game, with an eerily prescient antiterrorism storyline. By 2003, the game's developer Ion Storm and publisher Eidos Interactive had followed up with *Deus Ex: Invisible War*, set in the year 2070, this time for both PC and Microsoft® Xbox® game platforms. Both games were a success with both gamers and critics.

For *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, production was moved to then-fledgling Eidos-Montreal in 2007. Not about to rest on the laurels of its predecessors, the newest version of the storied franchise is set in 2027, nearly a quarter century before the original game. By going back to before the beginning, Eidos-Montreal served notice of its intention to reboot and revitalize *Deus Ex*, and has done just that. In the process, the multitalented team made intensive use of Autodesk® 3ds Max®, Autodesk® Maya®, and Autodesk® MotionBuilder® software.

The Challenge

"Before we started work on *Human Revolution*, we dedicated ourselves to fully absorbing and understanding the entire *Deus Ex* universe," says David Anfossi, producer at Eidos-Montreal. "We already knew that this was a truly great game, but we were committed to making the game even better. With that in mind, we spent those first months fully immersing ourselves in the game play and storyline."

Making a great thing even better is a daunting prospect, but the Eidos-Montreal team was nothing if not bold: "We deliberately built a team that seeks out and embraces these kinds of challenges," says Stéphane D'Astous, general manager at Eidos-Montreal. "From the start, Autodesk supported our crazy project. We wanted to deliver the greatest *Deus Ex* experience possible, and Autodesk software, together with Autodesk Consulting and customer support have been with us every step of the way. That has been very gratifying."

The Solution

To achieve a revitalized vision, *Human Revolution* shifts the focus away from terrorism and conspiracy theories and toward the ethical implications of "human augmentation," or the use of biomechanical devices to give humans nearly superhuman powers. In addition, the Eidos-Montreal team has focused on creating the most realistic and compelling human characters that the franchise has yet seen. To do that, the team has relied on the combined capabilities of Autodesk Maya, 3ds Max, and MotionBuilder software.

"Our vision for the game is so ambitious that our biggest challenges have come from getting everything to fit on a disc," says Laurent Labelle, character modeler at Eidos-Montreal. "While most games might have two or three characters on the screen at one time, *Human Revolution* can have as many as 20 unique characters at once. We had to get very creative to ensure we made the most efficient reuse of our texturing and shading and other elements, so we could maintain unique-looking characters without exceeding memory constraints."

Technical art director Frédéric Chappart points to the smoother interoperability and higher-fidelity data exchange made possible by Autodesk® FBX® asset exchange technology as a key factor in enabling the distinctive look of *Human Revolution*. "At the beginning, our game engine was based entirely on Autodesk Maya," says Chappart. "We soon found that we wanted to take advantage of the great talent pool working with 3ds Max and MotionBuilder. With FBX, we have had much more flexibility in creating new modeling, texturing, shading, and lighting techniques that artists can produce and reproduce easily, while still staying within memory limits."

For lead animator Jonathan Simard, the project has opened up a whole new world with Autodesk Maya software: "When I first came to Eidos-Montreal and to this game, I had no experience with Maya," he says. "Now, I would pick Maya as my 3D software every time. The Maya navigation flow is the best I've ever experienced."

The Results

According to everyone involved, bringing *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* to life has been a long, complex, and challenging process. It has also been a successful and rewarding one, thanks in part to Autodesk's consulting and customer support services.

"The Autodesk support has been fantastic," says Chappart. "Among many other things, we needed to develop a complex pipeline for cutscenes, which was far from an easy mandate. We had countless challenges facing us, and Autodesk software and support helped us overcome them all."

To learn more about the game, visit **www.deusex.com**. To learn more about Autodesk games software, visit **www.autodesk.com/games**.



***Deus Ex: Human Revolution*™. Image courtesy of Eidos-Montreal.**

Autodesk

EDGE

Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW
Telephone: +44 (0)1225 442244
Fax: +44 (0)1225 732275
Email: edge@futurenet.com
Edge website: next-gen.biz

PEOPLE ON EDGE
Tony Mott editor-in-chief
Alex Wiltshire online editor
Jason Killingsworth features editor
Ian Evenden production editor
Craig Owens writer
David Valjalo writer
Christophe Kagotani Tokyo bureau
Mark Wynne senior art editor
Darren Phillips art editor
Andrew Hind deputy art editor

CONTRIBUTORS
Brick Bardo, Nathan Brown, Matthew Castle, Nick Cox, N'Gai Croal, Emma Davies, Martin Davies, Christian Donlan, Joel Gregory, Duncan Harris, Phil Haycraft, Clint Hocking, Ben Maxwell, Simon Parkin, Steven Poole, Randy Smith, Richard Stanton, Ernst Stratmann, Keith Stuart

ADVERTISING
Jas Rai advertising sales manager (jas.rai@futurenet.com)
Jade Hargreaves sales executive
Emma Cull advertising manager
Sean Igoe advertising director
Advertising phone +44 (0) 207 042 4219

MARKETING
Tom Acton marketing campaign manager
James Kick brand marketing manager
Esther Gardiner promotions executive

CIRCULATION
Stuart Agnew trade marketing manager
Matt Cooper trade marketing executive
Rachael Cock trade marketing director
John Lawton international account manager (john.lawton@futurenet.com)

PRINT & PRODUCTION
Frances Twentyman production co-ordinator
Rose Griffiths production manager
Richard Mason head of production

LICENSING
Tim Hudson head of international licensing

FUTURE PUBLISHING LIMITED
James Binns head of **Edge** international and PC gaming
Ian Miller group art director
Robin Abbott creative director
Matthew Williams design director
Jim Douglas editorial director
Mark Wood CEO

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Iain Russell subscriptions product manager
Phone our UK hotline on 0844 848 2852
Phone our International hotline on +44 (0) 1604 251045
Subscribe online at www.myfavouritemagazines.co.uk

Printed in the UK by William Gibbons.
Covers printed by Grange, Brighton, East Sussex.
Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd
2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT.
(0207 429 4000)

"Malfunction. Need input."

A member of the Audit Bureau of Circulations
29,007
January–December 2009

Future produces carefully targeted magazines, websites and events for people with a passion. Our portfolio includes more than 100 magazines, websites and events and we export or license our publications to 90 countries around the world.

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)
www.futureplc.com

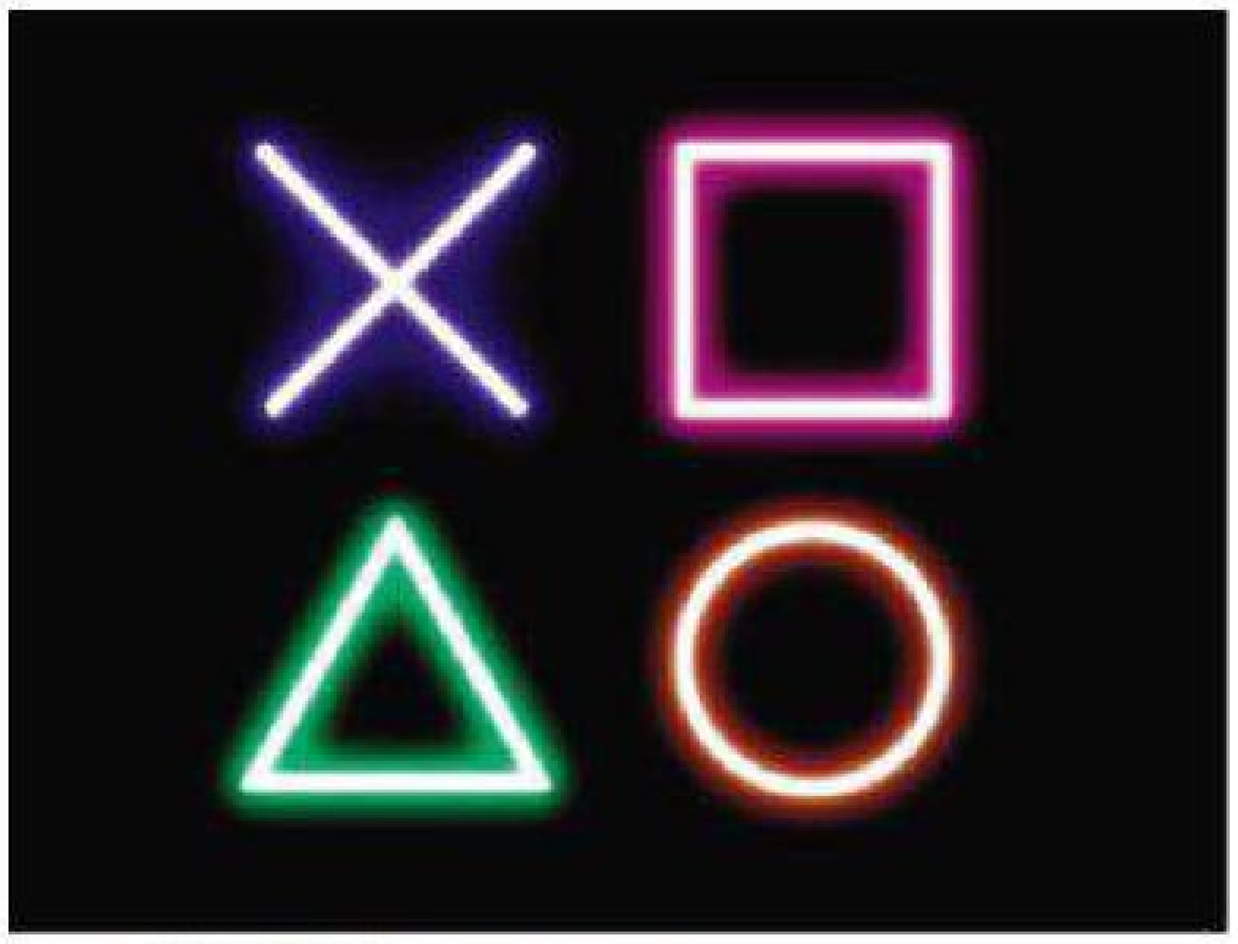
Chief Executive: Stevie Spring
Non-executive Chairman: Roger Parry
Group Finance Director: John Bowman
Tel +44 (0)20 7042 4000 (London)
Tel +44 (0)1225 442244 (Bath)

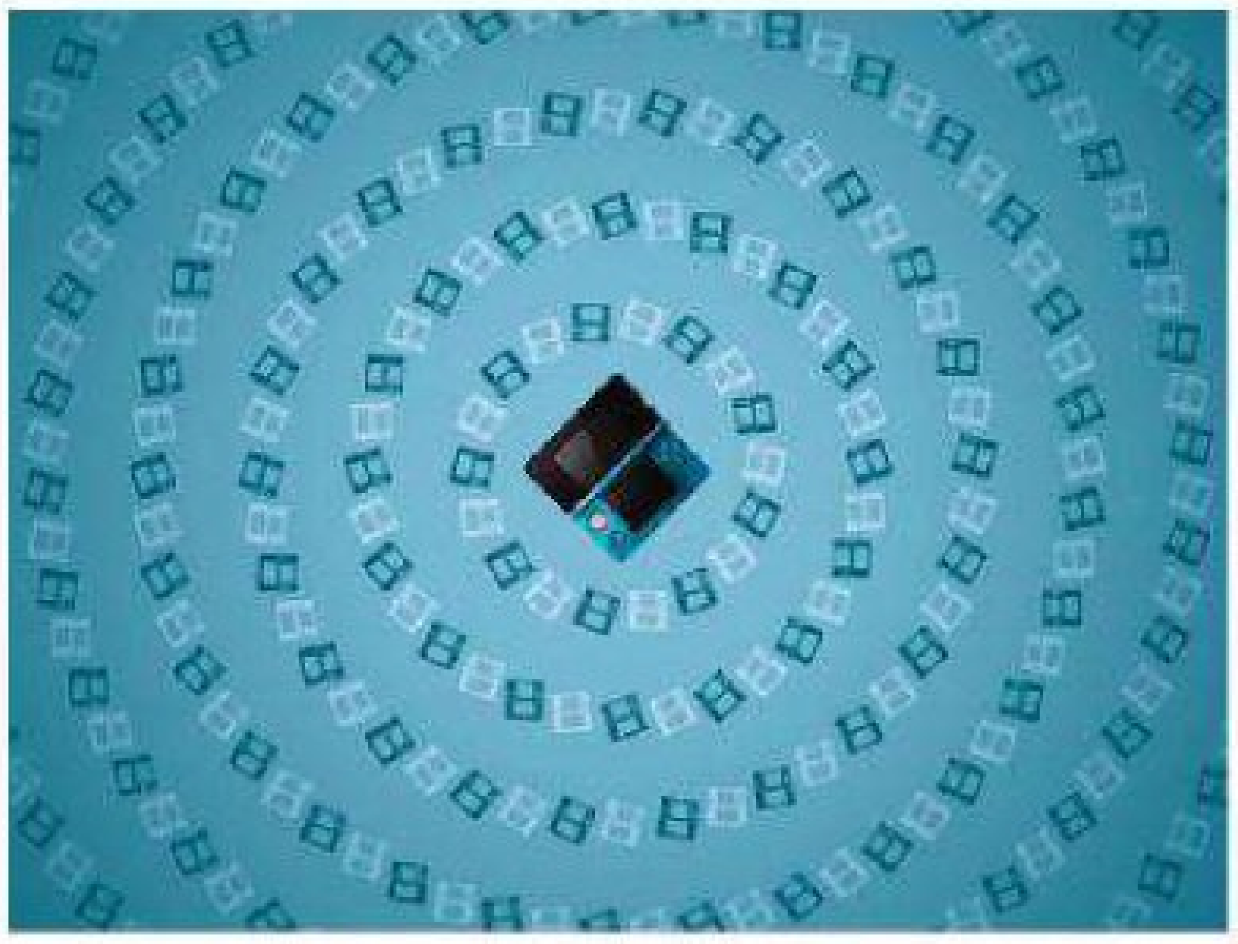
CONTENTS

MARCH

This month









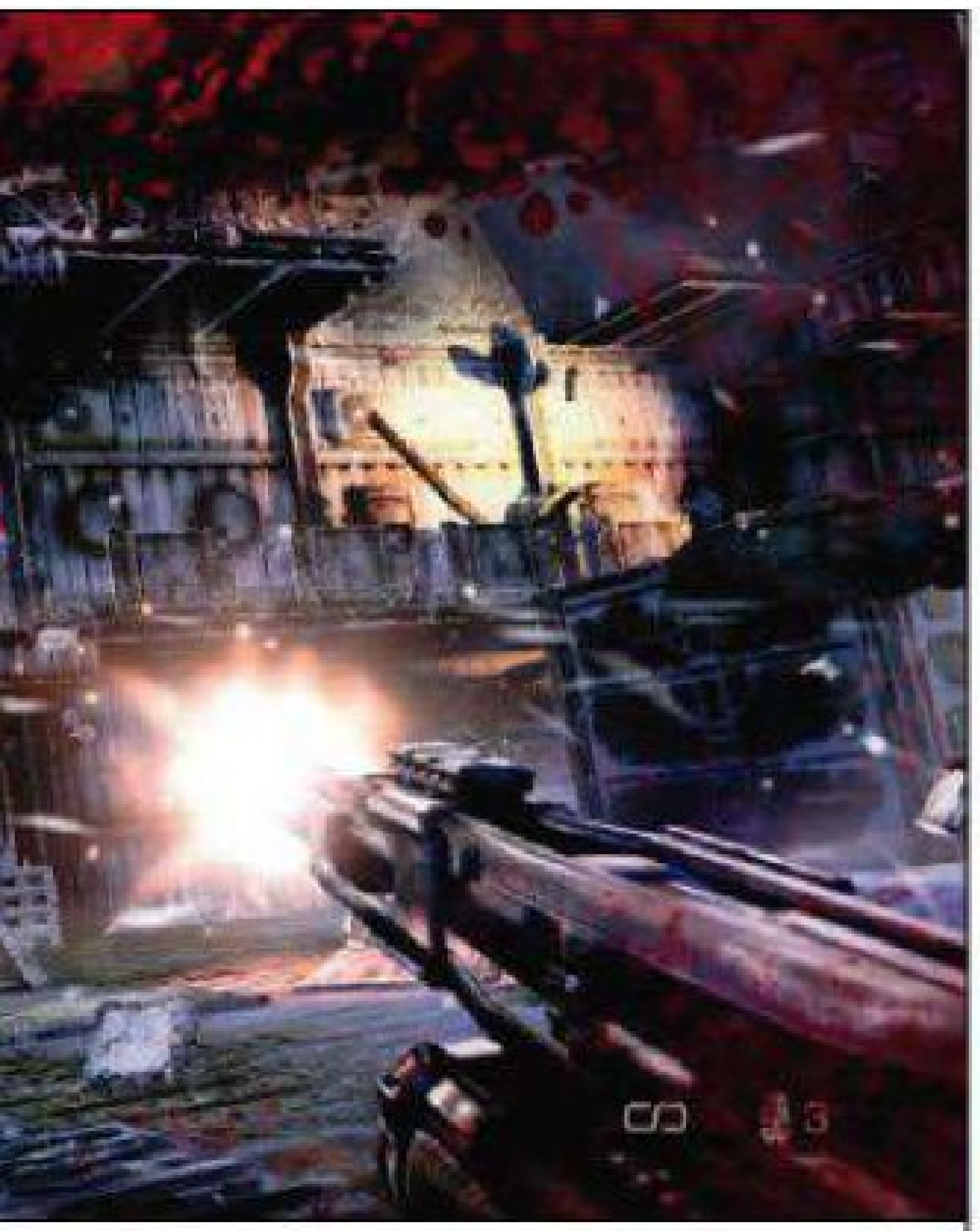


Every month

CONTENTS
CONTINUED

Hype

Review



86

MARVEL VS CAPCOM 3





OKAMIDEN



MINDJACK



BREACH



DE BLOB 2



KNIGHTS CONTRACT

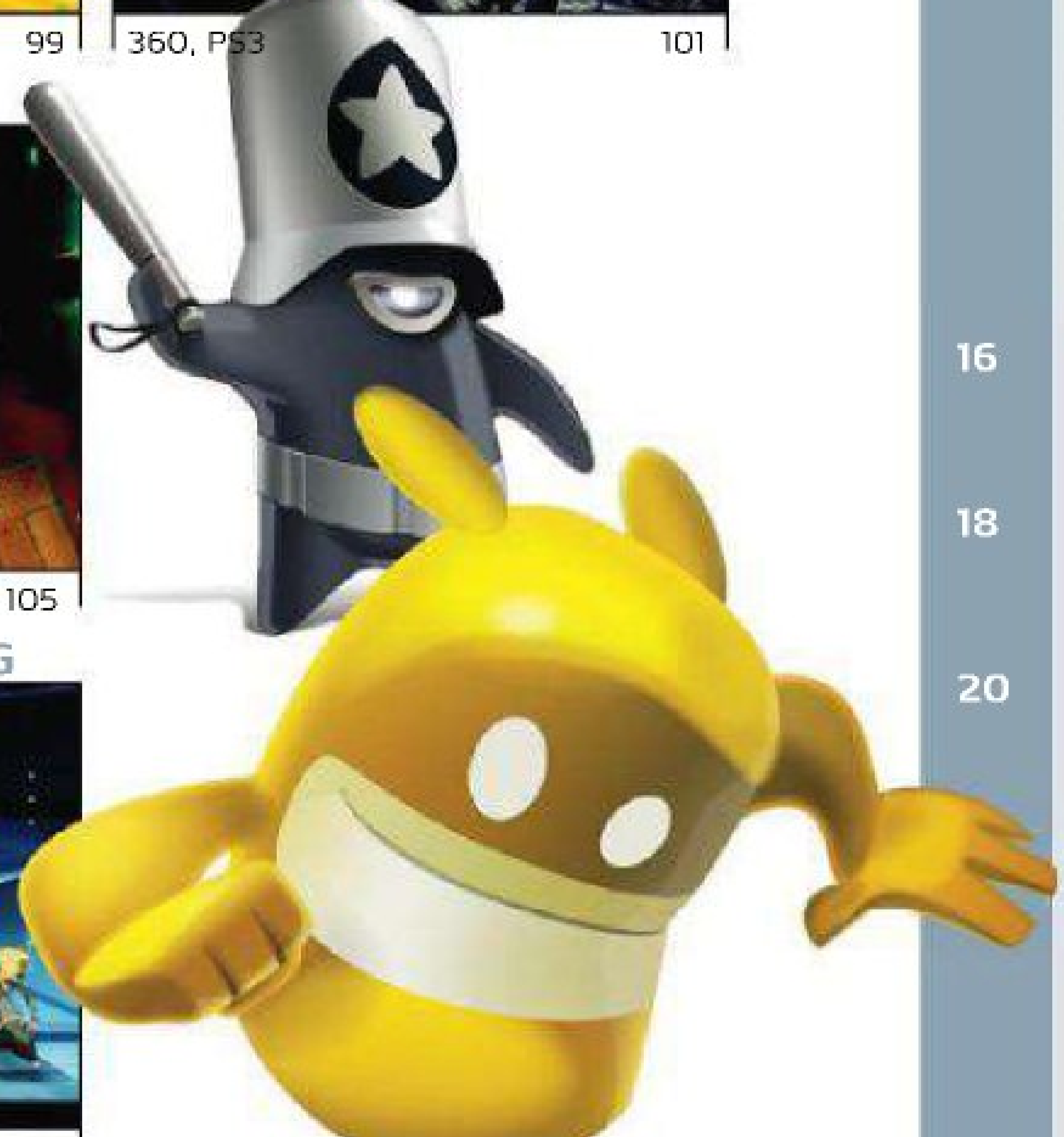


BIONIC COMMANDO REARMED 2



EXPLODEMON





LORD OF ARCANA



HARD CORPS: UPRISING



START








SONY
PlayStation

HARDWARE

Monster in your pocket

Sony offers the first glimpse of its new handheld dynamo, which promises to put PS3 power in the palm of your hands



On January 27 at PlayStation's annual conference in Tokyo, Sony CEO Kaz Hirai held up the company's new portable gaming machine for the world to see. If the device – currently codenamed NGP, or Next Generation Portable – indeed packs the muscle Sony claims, it probably could've used one of its freshly acquired analogue sticks to hoist Hirai into the air for an infinitely more memorable photo op. In addition to being the most immediately visible differentiating factor from its PSP predecessor, NGP's twin analogue sticks speak volumes about Sony's ambitions for the device. It clearly believes that a key pillar of next-generation handhelds involves faithfully recreating its PS3 console experience with as few concessions as possible. To this day, the sandpapery nub of PSP's circular analogue pad feels like a half-hearted attempt to bring precision controls to a gaming handheld. And with firstperson shooters such as *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* toppling industry-wide sales records in 2010, it's no surprise that NGP offers a control scheme capable of accommodating FPSes.



Yoshida demos an *Uncharted* jungle stage to give a sense of how a touchscreen can be applied to a game usually played with analogue sticks. Tapping an unsuspecting enemy, for example, causes Drake to push him over a cliff

Early feedback from thirdparty developers, some calling it "as powerful as a PS3", seemed like hyperbole until Sony's Tokyo event, with demos from Capcom, Sega, Konami and Epic

One of the PlayStation brand's distinct advantages over the competition is the broader electronics-market wisdom of its parent company. And NGP hints at some interesting future developments. High-end laptops have become so powerful that many consumers have given up on bulky, immobile desktop computers altogether. Yet the videogame console still clings to the logic of the desktop computer, enticing users to forgive its bulk and lack of portability because of the computing power and precision input schemes it provides. Handhelds came to occupy a separate class of device because their modest technological capabilities required significant compromise. Nintendo solved this dilemma with its DS handheld by creating a novel user experience to defuse unflattering comparisons with home console specs.

Sony has opted for a more ambitious approach to addressing the lagging capability of handheld gaming systems: close the gap. NGP – powered by a quadruple-core ARM CPU – looks like the first portable handheld gaming device poised to offer an authentic 'home console in your hands' experience. Early feedback about the platform from thirdparty developers, some calling it "as powerful as a PS3", seemed like hyperbole until Sony's Tokyo event, which offered demos from Capcom, Sega, Konami, Epic Games and Activision.

When asked about the expected timeframe involved in porting a 360/PS3 Unreal Engine-



In a moment that recalls ex-SCE head Ken Kutaragi's introduction of PSP, current CEO Kaz Hirai shows off NGP for the first time

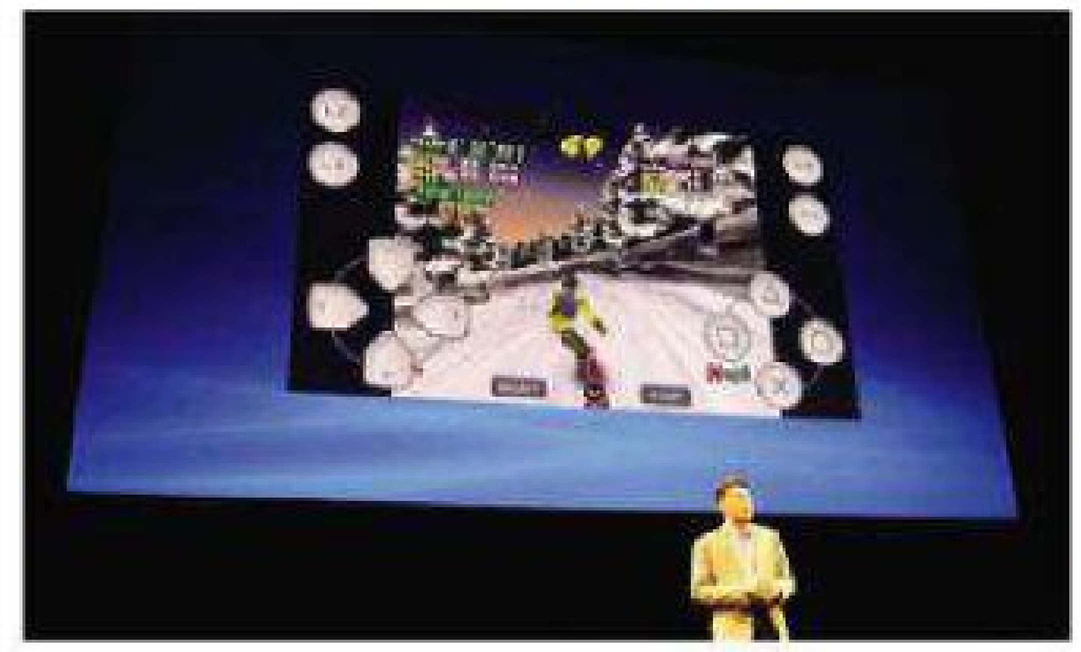
Under the hood

The technology powering NGP

- **CPU: ARM Cortex-A9 core (quad core)**
- **GPU: SGX543MP4+**
- **External dimensions: Approx 182.0x18.6x83.5mm (tentative, excludes largest projection)**
- **Screen: five inches (16:9), 960x544 pixels, approx 16 million colours, OLED multi-touch screen (capacitive type)**
- **Rear touch pad: Multi-touch pad (capacitive type)**
- **Cameras: front and rear**
- **Sound: Built-in stereo speakers; built-in microphone**
- **Sensors: Sixaxis motion sensing system (three-axis gyroscope, three-axis accelerometer); three-axis electronic compass**
- **Location: Built-in GPS; Wi-Fi location service support**
- **Keys/switches: PS button; power button; directional buttons (up/down/left/right); PlayStation action buttons (triangle, circle, cross, square); shoulder buttons (right/left); right stick; left stick; start button; select button; volume buttons (+/-)**
- **Wireless communications: Mobile network connectivity (3G); IEEE 802.11b/g/n (Wi-Fi) (Infrastructure mode/Ad-hoc mode); Bluetooth 2.1+EDR A2DP/AVRCP/HSP**







Yoshida demos *Little Deviants* (left), which lets you elevate the terrain by running your fingers across the rear touch panel. The primary NGP interface (top) is LiveArea, which can be accessed at any time. SCE boss Kaz Hirai (above) discusses PlayStation Suite, which enables PS1 titles on certified Android handsets

powered game to NGP, Epic Games VP **Mark Rein** tells us: "It will be different for every game, but Trendy Entertainment went from finding out about NGP to having the demo [of PSN/XBLA game *Dungeon Defenders*] you saw on stage in under one week. Even more impressively, they were able to use the textures, level data and object polygon counts of the PS3 version."

The announcement comes at an opportune moment for the company, temporarily quieting the media fanfare being lavished on Nintendo's 3DS console in the wake of high-profile Nintendo media showcases in New York and Amsterdam. But Sony clearly has an additional rival in mind, as the Japanese giant feels the pressure of Apple's increasing market foothold on its entire business. The newly announced PlayStation Suite will bring legacy PlayStation titles to spec-meeting Android handsets through a dedicated app store. And NGP's touchscreen interface will make sure that even the angriest bird will soar effortlessly on its piercingly vibrant five-inch OLED screen.

NGP's biggest innovation comes in the form of a rear touch panel, for which Sony has only just begun to think up applications. The stage demo of a new game called *Little Deviants* involved rolling your character around by elevating the gameworld's terrain, which you achieve by sliding your fingers across the rear touch panel.

"The hardware division told us they could put touch panels on the back. I saw no real use for that. But the team that made Little Deviants made the demo – then I realised the potential"

Developers will likely find creative applications for the rear touch panel, but it's still difficult not to regard the 'if one touch surface is good, then two must be better' logic with a cocked eyebrow. Even **Shuhei Yoshida**, Sony's director of worldwide studios, failed to recognise the use for such an input surface when the idea was first suggested. "The hardware division told us they could put touch panels on the back if we'd like," he explains. "I saw no real use for that. But the team that made *Little Deviants* found the idea interesting and made the demo – then I realised the potential."

Simon Oliver from HandCircus – the studio behind the critically acclaimed iPhone puzzle-adventure *Rolando* games – is unreservedly enthusiastic about the potential presented by NGP's new touch interface. "I'm particularly interested in what new interactions would be possible with the combination of rear- and front-facing touch sensors," he says. "One of the biggest obstacles to playing games on the iPhone is the 'sausage stylus' effect, where your fingers can really obscure the action. The potential to remove those issues and

Q&A: Shuhei Yoshida president, Sony Computer Entertainment worldwide studios

You've demonstrated the various control methods the NGP is capable of. Do you fear that by allowing such a range of inputs it could make the gaming experience difficult?
That is very much up to the developers. They have to find a fun way to exploit the controls while keeping the experience accessible, if not simple. My demos on stage were all designed to show the range of possibilities we came up with. In *Uncharted* you can touch the screen or the back of the unit to perform some of the actions, but you can decide not to use these features and play in a more standard way. I think users may need to get used to those new control features before going deeper with them. I think there's a need for a trial-and-error process.

NGP is the codename of the hardware. Why did you not go for PSP2? Is it an indication of new branding? Do you fear consumers may be confused?
Well, NGP is the codename we've used since 2008. We will announce the final name of the console sometime later this year.

"When considering various features, we always had our price range in mind. There were elements that we found pretty cool, but had to set aside to remain on target. It's a big lesson we learnt from the PS3"

With NGP's various features and high-quality screen, could it prove too expensive for massmarket consumers?
I can't talk about a definitive price at this stage. But since the very beginning we had a target in mind. So, when considering various features, we always had our price range in mind. There were elements that we found pretty cool, but had to set aside to remain on target. It's a big lesson we learnt from the PS3. There's no point putting everything you want into a device and doing the math later. We always had the price and consumer in mind. We had to sell something that people could buy.

Why no XMB? Was it not suitable for touch controls?
That is indeed one key reason. The other fundamental point was our desire to make this device very social-network oriented: there are lots of fun games on Facebook, for example. We wanted to integrate the social networking factor, the potential for friends to join in, interact at any moment. We wanted the entire screen to be part of that experience. To do so, we thought it was important to let users keep track of their game even when they weren't playing it – with the LiveArea, for example.

With high-end specs, that screen and 3G, we have to ask: how long is NGP's battery life?
In all honesty our engineers are still hard at work on this area, but our goal is to have similar battery life to the current PSP.

With PlayStation Suite, is SCE aiming to become a serious content provider in the mobile phone market?
Sony is a group, and SCE is part of that group. The PS3 is a Sony-branded product that SCE makes. Nowadays, we have numerous portable devices out there and Sony is making some of them. For instance, at SCE, we are not making mobile phones or any



Android smartphones – we don't even cooperate on any level on these products. But what if we could provide them with games, even casual titles? It makes sense for the PlayStation brand but also as a way to reach those [mobile] devices as well. There is now a real synergy at play between



The NGP unit looks strikingly similar to a PSP, but then the subtle addition of another analogue stick catches your eye. The handheld's face is dominated by its ample OLED display, while the iconic PlayStation shapes adorn the rear touch panel like cascading Matrix hieroglyphs



Hands on with NGP

What's it like to play with Sony's latest creation?

Based on our hands-on time with the device following the presentation in Tokyo, we can confirm that Sony's 'Next Generation Portable' feels considerably larger than previous PSP models. The lack of pocket friendliness, however, proves a fair trade-off for the spectacular five-inch OLED display. Despite the larger dimensions, the handheld console is actually thinner than a PSP. It's hard to believe such power is contained in such a slim form factor, especially without giving off any heat.

The so-called 'Super Oval' body shape is very comfortable, especially in a DualShock manner of use, and it feels practical in a more standard digital use. As you'd expect, the body appears robust, and the plastic and rubber components feel high quality. Weight-wise, it's light, certainly lighter than a PSP-2000. Importantly, when performing a touch operation in-game on the front screen, your thumb has a comfortably short distance to travel, so you don't sacrifice grip. The rear touch panel is perfectly responsive, but its ease of use will obviously depend on game design.

The analogue sticks are the best ever implemented in a portable device, giving the feel of using a genuine DualShock controller, with all of the granularity of input you'd expect. However, it doesn't appear that additional inputs can be triggered by depressing the thumbsticks, and in the absence of L2 and R2 triggers, developers will no doubt emulate such inputs via the rear touch panel.

Like previous PSP models, the NGP screen is the anchor of its user experience, offering a vivid display at any angle, with no ghosting during even fast motion sequences. Finally, the screen's touch sensitivity seems like a success, responding snappily to our inputs.

introduce new behaviours based on front-back pinch, 3D rotations and more is really intriguing."

The stage demo of a jungle section from *Uncharted* offered an example of hybrid controls on NGP. Players are free to use classic analogue controls to send Nathan Drake scrambling up walls and vines, but the touchscreens add some new input methods. Swiping your finger up a wall will send Drake pathfinding in the direction you've indicated. Or you can tap on a ledge to climb up. One particularly amusing input involved Drake sneaking up behind an unsuspecting enemy, and then, with a simple tap on the screen, pushing him over a cliff edge.

It remains to be seen how players adapt to hybrid control schemes, but we have a hard time believing that anyone will choose to climb a vine in *Uncharted* by alternating downward finger scrapes on the rear touchpad when simply pushing up on the left analogue stick would suffice. Adoption of novel input combinations will obviously hinge on how seamlessly they're implemented. Ultimately, while, say, Apple's iOS pinch inputs felt logical and intuitive from the moment they were introduced, Sony's solution will take more time to bed in.

NGP may exhibit a healthy respect for Apple's handheld devices in terms of its networking features and digital-download capabilities, but don't expect the internal storage you've become accustomed to in your iPhone and iPad. Instead, Sony's hardware contains two card slots, one for a proprietary new game medium and a second of unknown format that will deal with Trophies, game saves and downloaded digital content. Game cards will contain rewritable space, in the same manner as DS media.

Sony Computer Entertainment CEO Kaz Hirai has also assured PSP owners that the company is working with developers to make sure that digital versions of their favourite PSP titles will be available on NGP. You'll also be able to redownload previously purchased digital PSP games to your new handheld, provided you haven't exceeded your PSN download threshold.

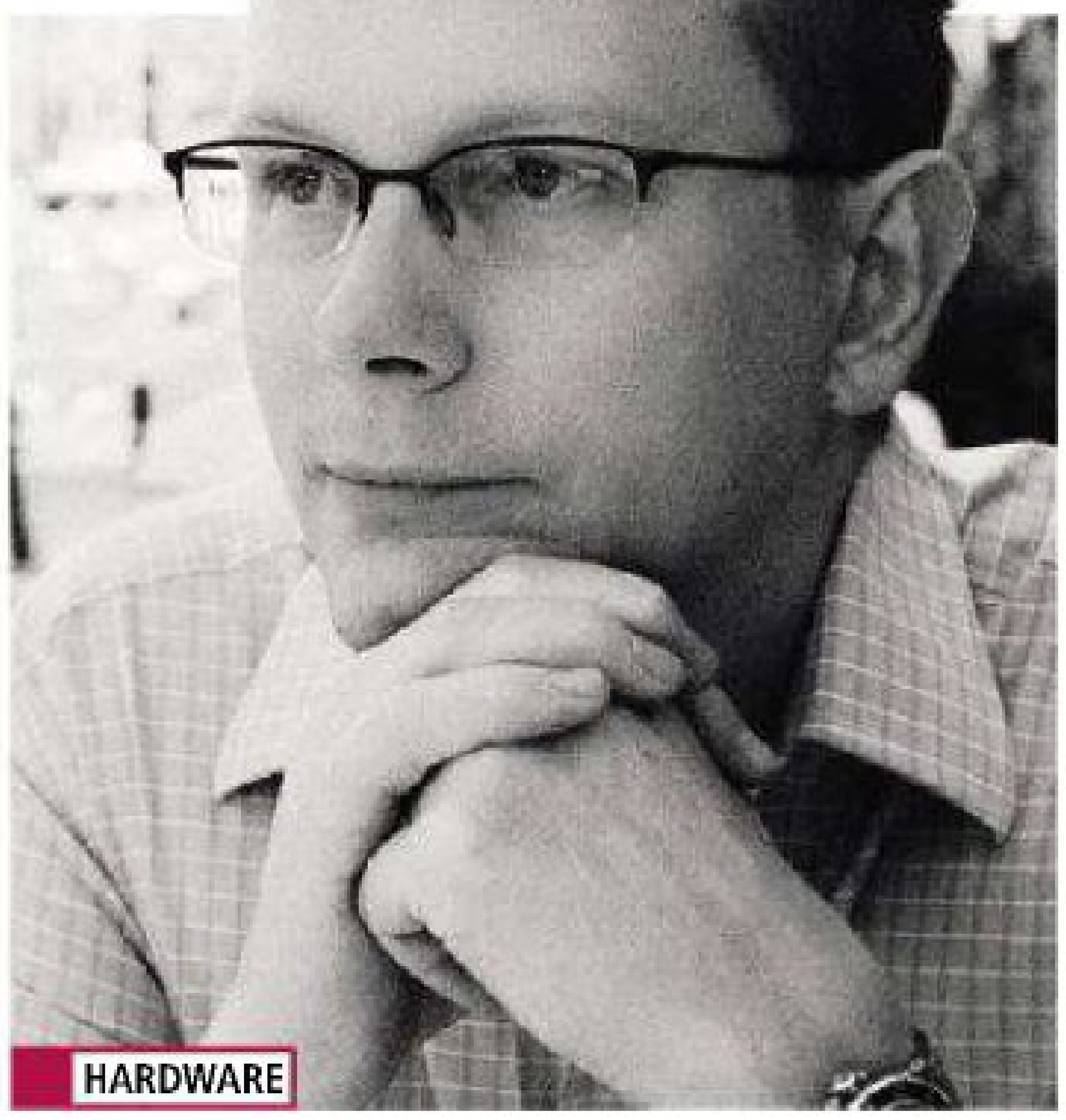
Sony hasn't yet announced any details of the unit's price, launch lineup or battery life, but more details are expected to arrive at E3 in June. How will it counter the threat from Nintendo's 3DS? "I think they've already done the most important thing," says Epic's Rein. "They've designed a great machine that will allow developers to build great games. The challenge now is to turn great hardware into a great platform, and they have experience doing that."

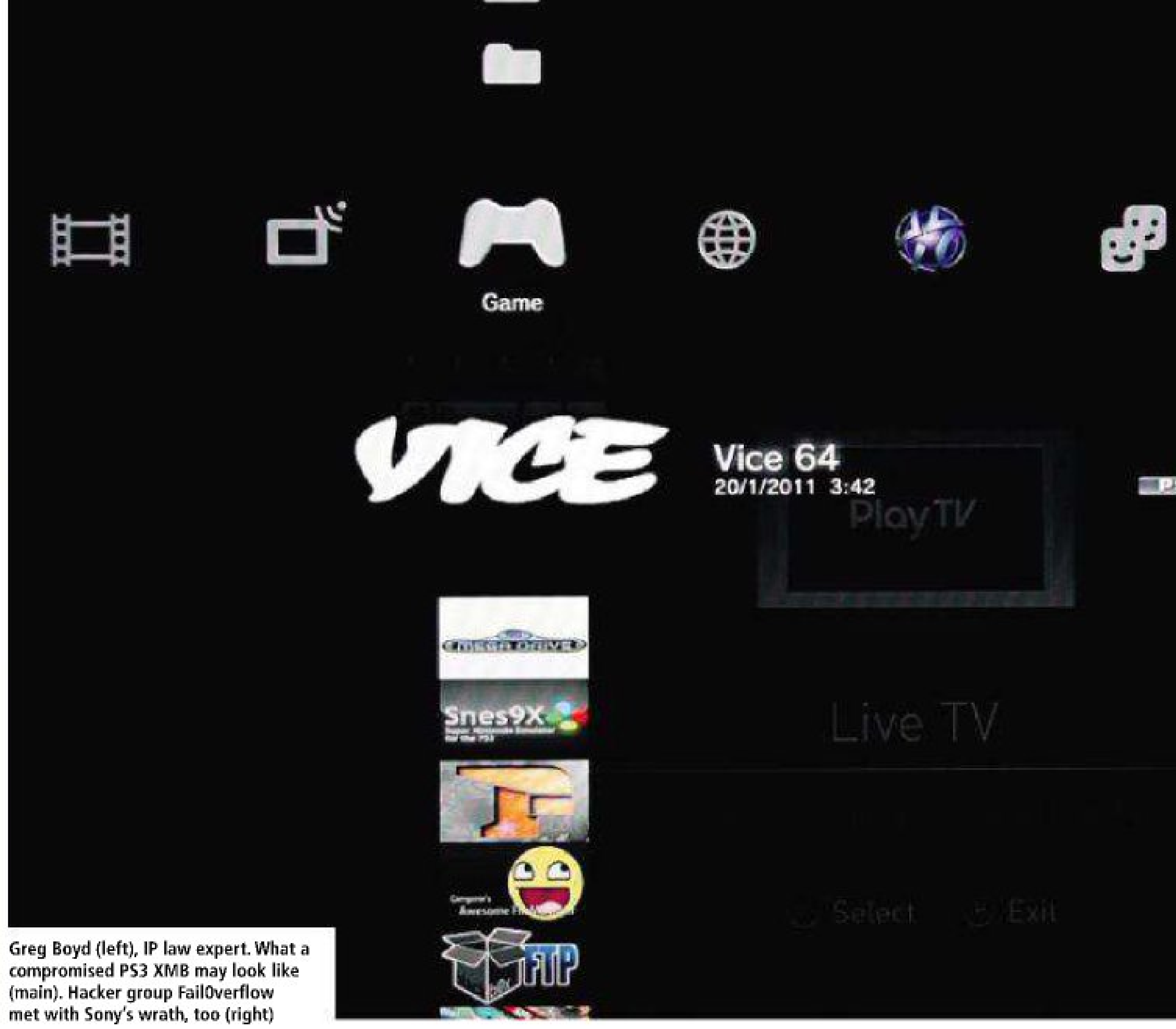
Sony and SCE. Hirai-san is not only looking after SCE but also the Vaio division. He has a global vision for the group: running the business as we did didn't answer the fluid, changing reality of today.

Is the PlayStation Certified seal based on specs?
Yes, we need a certain level of specifications to run our content and for consumers to enjoy it properly. There are so many devices out there – it's a very fragmented world. It's hard to see what kind of content users want to enjoy with such variety around. By establishing this seal, users have a clear idea of what to expect. The devices that will be compatible will have a logo and access to the PS Store.

During the NGP presentation there were demos designed to explain how easy it is to port PS3 content to the device. Aside from the benefits of using Unreal Engine, is the NGP dev kit skewed toward this sort of activity?
We were very focused on this area from the start. This is, again, a lesson learnt from the PS3. We had to make the development environment for NGP as 'easy' as possible. Today, many teams are familiar with the PS3 and are used to including a variety of effects in their titles. Based on this expertise – and also the working habits they developed working on the PS3 – we had to make development on the NGP as natural as possible – an extension of the PS3, if you will. So the three demos you've seen – *Lost Planet 2*, *Ryu Ga Gotoku* [*Yakuza*] and *MGS4* – they prove porting is simple and quick, but it doesn't mean that's all you can expect. My view of NGP isn't just as a platform for porting PS3 titles.

At a time when the existing PSP is gaining a younger audience, it feels like there is still market potential for the introduction of a PSP-4000. What will come of PSP when NGP launches?
The PSP will go on. It won't end because the NGP launches. We can't possibly stop it at a time when we are struggling to meet demand. The NGP features everything Sony can and wants to do today. It's a platform looking forward with great ambition. It can't replace a platform that has already been on sale for seven years now. In terms of pricing, we can't sell the NGP for the same price as a PSP. The PSP has become very affordable and popular, especially with younger generations. I think the NGP needs time to mature and get adopted by users. So, for the time being, both platforms will coexist.





HARDWARE

Greg Boyd (left), IP law expert. What a compromised PS3 XMB may look like (main). Hacker group Fail0verflow met with Sony's wrath, too (right)

The price of PlayStation freedom

The hacking of PS3 has many questioning Sony's right to protect its IP, and the consumer's right to enjoy their hardware

In the days after Fail0verflow, a team of hackers seeking revenge against Sony for its removal of PS3's OtherOS support, exposed critical vulnerabilities in the console's security, nothing felt like news. So compressed was the timeline of forum discussion, political spats between hackers, inevitable custom firmware and Sony's hostile response that, in hindsight, PS3 felt opened in the blink of an eye. And for users of its official 3.56 firmware, released as we went to press, it seems to have closed just as quickly.

Despite doomsayers predicting the irreversible collapse of PS3's security, an exploit so calamitous that only a hardware revision could stop it, Sony has made this a cat-and-mouse game after all. Talk of remote authentication checks in the latest firmware, hard to predict and spoof, has left PS3 modders fearing PlayStation Network bans and a long, cyclical wait to play games requiring the latest official updates. Given that PS3 'calls home' several times irrespective of a PSN connection, many might be wondering what punishment they've incurred.

Legally, the severity of Sony's response could vary between territories, so let's focus on the biggest: the US. Just how much of a user's PS3 can Sony 'take back' if it finds it's being improperly used? What constitutes such use when the hardware is theoretically yours? Is there, as some believe, a 'kill switch' in your PS3 which at a moment's notice could turn it into a doorstop? And could Sony even use it? On that last point, says New York litigator **Greg Boyd**, the answer is 'yes'.

"If you make something which contains intellectual property, you can contract with the people that buy that object and give them a licence – like a movie ticket"

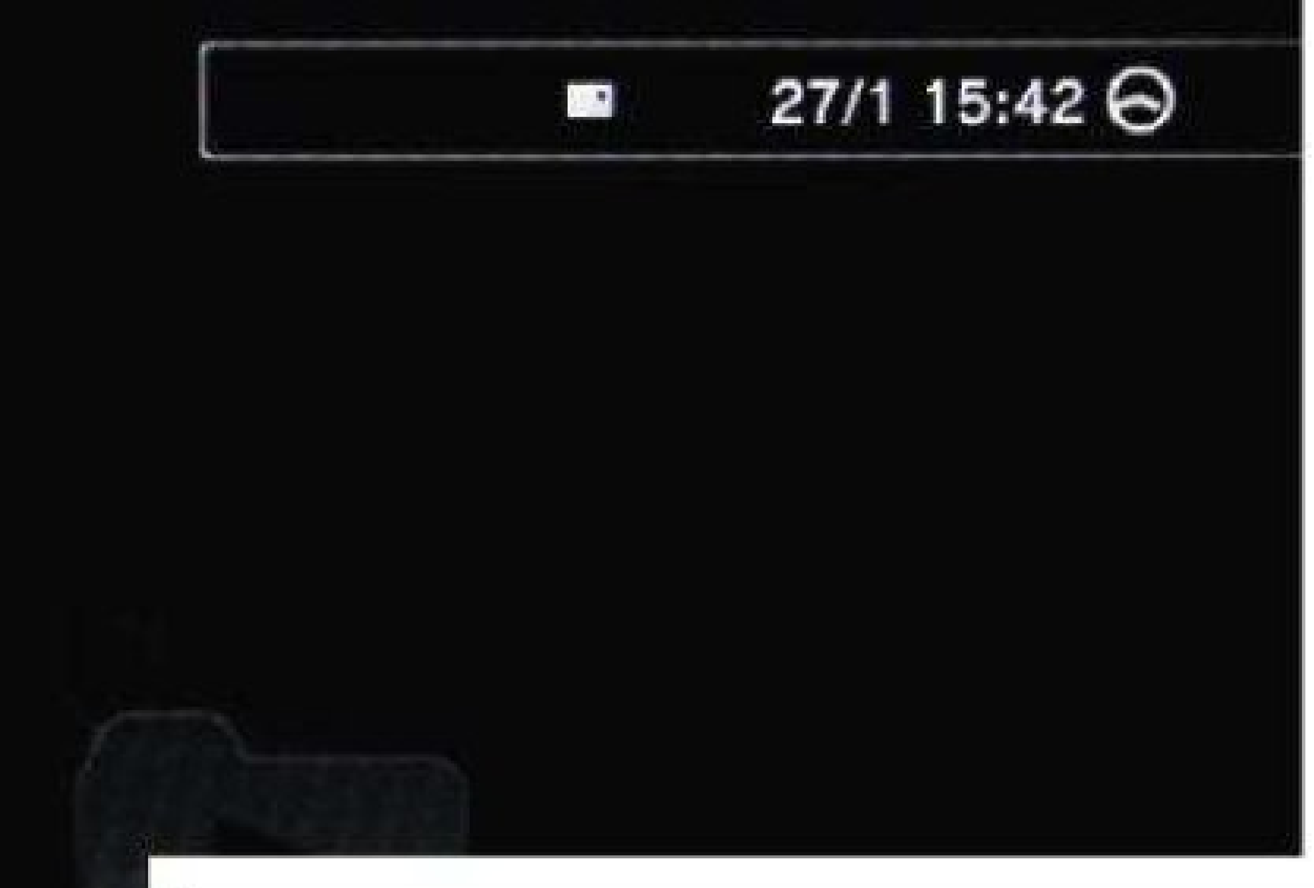
"It's relatively simple, even though people may have strong feelings to the contrary," he explains. "In the US, when you buy an apple, you can do what you want with it. But if you make something which contains intellectual property, you can contract with the people that buy that object and give them a licence – like a movie ticket. 'You can buy this widget if, and only if, you agree to play by these rules.'" Just such a contract exists, he says, between Sony and all of its users, and it thinks nothing of the hacker's credo that if you bought it, you can use it as you like.

"I recognise that people will want to tinker with everything they can physically get their hands on, and I recognise the grassroots justice feeling in that desire and share it myself in lots of ways. But the fact is that as a policy level – a government level – incentive for intellectual property, we've let people have rules about these things. In the US it's pretty non-controversial that PlayStation can control the use of its IP-laden bits of manufacture. And just as you're not allowed to reverse-engineer and modify a piece of software outside its licence, if people are providing you software contained within a piece of hardware, it doesn't surprise me that they could turn it off."

It's a more clear-cut assessment than you might expect given the history of videogame IP, the fallibility of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, and the bungled attempts to invoke it against modders in recent months. In December the case against Matthew Crippen, a hotel car park manager who ran a small business modding Xbox 360s, collapsed when US District Judge Philip Gutierrez became so incensed by the antics of the prosecution (ESA investigator Tony Rosario illegally filmed Crippen performing a mod which was then verified by Microsoft security expert Ken McGrail, who himself modded Xboxes in



PS3 Key made use of the PS Jailbreak USB modchip to bypass security checks. It was disabled by firmware 3.42





college) that he changed his reading of the DMCA mid-trial, apparently empathising with those using backups or homebrew.

Even closer to home – or indeed Home – George 'GeoHot' Hotz, the iPhone jailbreaker who went on to create the first custom PS3 firmware, exposed the DMCA's own weaknesses back in July. When Apple tried to protect its closed business model by claiming DMCA protection of the iOS bootloader, the Copyright Office concluded that, "while a copyright owner might try to restrict the programs that can be run on a particular operating system, copyright law is not the vehicle for imposition of such restrictions". The subject of a hard-fought restraining order Sony seems keen to apply to various file servers and 'scene members' in California, Hotz now faces a new legal battle which he doubtless hopes will go the same way.

The Apple ruling, though, "is a narrow exception and certainly not the rule in the US, at least not yet," notes Boyd. "That announcement is very new and we don't know how far it's going to go or how it will be tested and interpreted. It just adds a limited exception to one statute. A person would be a bit over-exuberant or at least premature to say it changes decades of case law on the larger subject. If you read the language carefully, it's also only for mobile devices and only to allow them to have interoperability with otherwise lawfully acquired programs. This likely doesn't extend to console hackers."

No such ambiguity, meanwhile, seems to affect a customer's access to a service like Xbox Live, a right which has been permanently revoked for hundreds of thousands of Xbox 360 modders. That Microsoft stopped short of 'bricking' the consoles entirely kept legal discourse subdued, but will Sony be so merciful?

"In the US, if you tamper with any complicated article of manufacture you purchase, whether it be a television or a car or a notebook computer, you can void the warranty on that. This is related," observes Boyd. "The PlayStation and all modern consoles are more than just a pencil or an apple, they're an integrated service that provides you something over time. So I would think that they are absolutely allowed to reduce their level of support or turn it off, particularly if it jeopardises their intellectual property."

Is even a base level of functionality not safe? Isn't that the right of a consumer who's just spent hundreds of dollars? "I feel the intuitional pulls of that idea but it's not entirely true, because cooked into that price is the agreement that you'll follow the rules. Let's imagine that you and I invent something. We're going to have two sets of rules: the 'play nice' rules and the 'no holds barred' rules. We might sell our invention for a dollar if they agree to play nice, but if they want to take it out and do whatever they want with it, maybe copy it or allow others to copy, even by accident, and you and me had spent a billion dollars developing it, then the price for that might not be a dollar. It probably wouldn't be."



Open warfare

Cheats flood *Call Of Duty* servers in the wake of security breach

In the age of *Call Of Duty* multiplayer, Sony's problems are Activision's problems. Unfortunately, thanks not just to custom firmware but also earlier dongle-enabled jailbreaks, they're very much your problems, too. At least they are if you're one of numerous *Modern Warfare 2* players reporting rampant cheating on the PS3 game's multiplayer servers – enough to prompt this less-than-compelling response from Infinity Ward: "Games rely on the security of the encryption on the platforms they're played on. Updates to the game through patches will not resolve this problem completely, unless the security exploit itself is resolved on the platform. However, that doesn't mean we're not going to look into every option available to us." The advice to brave grunts being pwned by cowardly supersoldiers? "Report inappropriate players to Sony."

OUT THERE



CRIME PAYS (FOR YOUR PHONE)



In further GeoHot news, the 21-year-old hacker received encouragement from the unlikeliest of sources when he was sent a complementary Windows Phone 7 device. The phone came courtesy of Brandon Watson, described as an "entrepreneur on loan to Microsoft focused on getting our developer mojo back". Microsoft initially rewarded ChevronWP7, the first WP7 cracker, with a trip to its HQ and a shirt that read: "I was the first to jailbreak Windows Phone 7, and all I got was this lousy T-shirt," but beat this when Watson tweeted to GeoHot: "If you want to build cool stuff on WP7, send me [an] email and the team will give you a phone – let dev creativity flourish." Unsurprisingly, Watson has since been fielding requests from others hoping for a freebie.

• tinyurl.com/geophone

SOUND BYTES

"PSP2, do want. Don't get the hate. Two analog sticks = shooters on a handheld for the first time. Potential, let's hope for follow thru."
Ken Levine teases a portable Irrational FPS and suddenly price doesn't seem to matter any more

"Portable hardware is worthless to me, but some of the games are actually worth playing. It's a problem that PSP2 doesn't seem to solve."
Treyarch PlayStation 3 programmer **Dan Olson** may be Sony's toughest consumer to break

"When I measured [battery life] by playing several Nintendo games, with the backlight set to the brightest level and the power save mode turned off, battery duration was about three hours. But if you use the power save mode under the same conditions, it gets about ten to 20 per cent longer. And if you set the backlight to the darkest setting, the battery lasts five hours, but the power save mode makes less of a difference then."
3DS system designer **Ryuji Umezu** gives a comprehensive insight into battery testing

"You can slip it in at night, and then when the owner wakes up in the morning and turns on the system, a new video is waiting."
Shigeryu Miyamoto discusses the sort of mischief that 3DS owners should expect

"...even though you've got a plethora of fighting titles and all these other ones, I think *Nintendogs* still appeals to even the hardcore gamers because of the graphics."
David Yarnton, Nintendo UK general manager, assures everyone that 3DS has the hardcore crowd covered. How did he know we're suckers for kittens?



HARDWARE

Hack and Slash

The man behind a Kinect hack on how experimenting with motion control could make music games hum again

British artist and designer **Chris O'Shea** wields cutting-edge technology as if it were a brightly coloured paintbrush. His various projects and installations – commissioned by the likes of the BBC, FACT and Design Museum London – inspire playfulness and wonder, jostling unexpectant audiences out of their hurry-along autopilot. We talk to the artist himself about his experimentation with Xbox 360's Kinect technology for a recent air guitar prototype, the capabilities and limitations of the tools, and what they portend for the future of music games.

"It's just giving you a fun experience, like you'd imagine it to be; it doesn't have to be an accurate simulation of real life. I don't think it's dumbing the experience down"

You first attempted an air guitar prototype in 2007 – what are your thoughts after revisiting the project using the Kinect sensor?
The air guitar project I tried in 2007, for the charity Shelter at Glastonbury, used a stereo camera – which created a depth image from its two cameras. And the problem I found was that it was very noisy, but also these depth cameras are very expensive. I think that particular camera was about £1,500, and typically you're looking at anywhere up to about £4,000 for a decent depth camera, to give you the depth of the scene. So I think the biggest impact has been the cost. The Kinect coming out for £120 means it's really accessible to a much wider range of people.

Because the Kinect sensor creates a depth image using an infrared light pattern, rather than using two cameras and working out the stereo

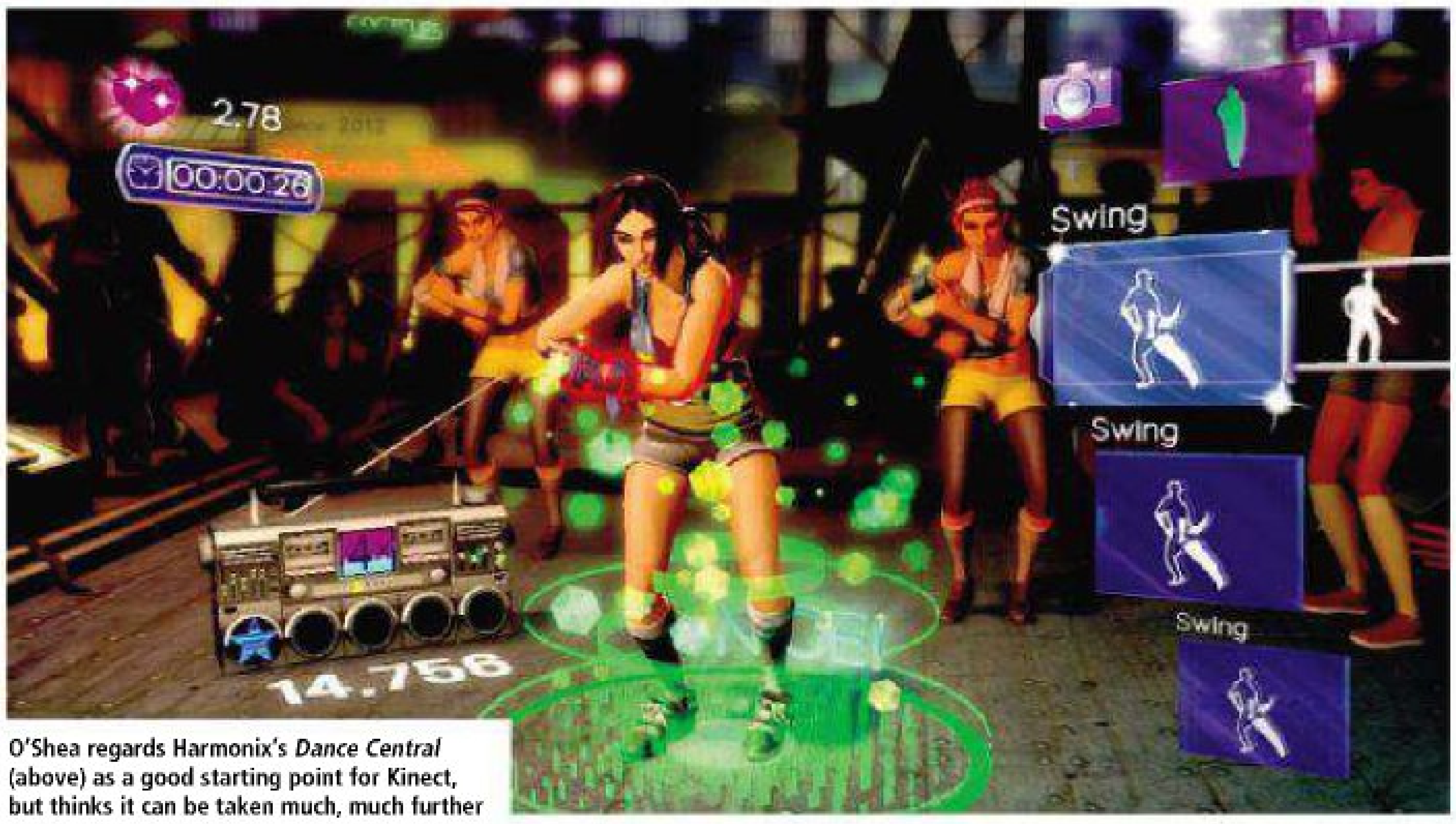


Watching O'Shea's video demonstration (above) proves the clever simplicity of the idea (even if the early version of the hand tracking can be a little off at times). After all, who doesn't know how to play an air guitar? Microsoft's response to the project is as yet unknown





O'Shea (above) is a British artist and designer whose play-based work makes a great deal of use of technology, including Kinect



O'Shea regards Harmonix's *Dance Central* (above) as a good starting point for Kinect, but thinks it can be taken much, much further



How it works

The process that O'Shea's hacked Kinect uses to translate your air strumming into the graphics that you see on your screen

First, the Kinect sensor thresholds the scene to find a person and uses the histogram to get the most likely depth of a person in the scene. Then any pixels closer than the person to the camera are possible hands. It also uses contour extremity finding on the person blob to look for hands in situations where your hand is at the same depth as your body. This only works if you are facing the camera front-on. It uses one hand as the neck of the guitar, drawing a virtual line from there, through the person, to create the guitar line. The other hand is tracked to see if it passes through the line to strum the guitar. The neck hand position controls the chord. You can see a video demonstration online (bit.ly/airguitarkinect).

image between them, you get a much nicer-quality depth image. It's a cleaner image, it's got a lot more detail in it, and it's a lot more accurate in terms of what it's seeing in the scene. The technology of the depth camera has been out a while but it's just been too expensive to buy.

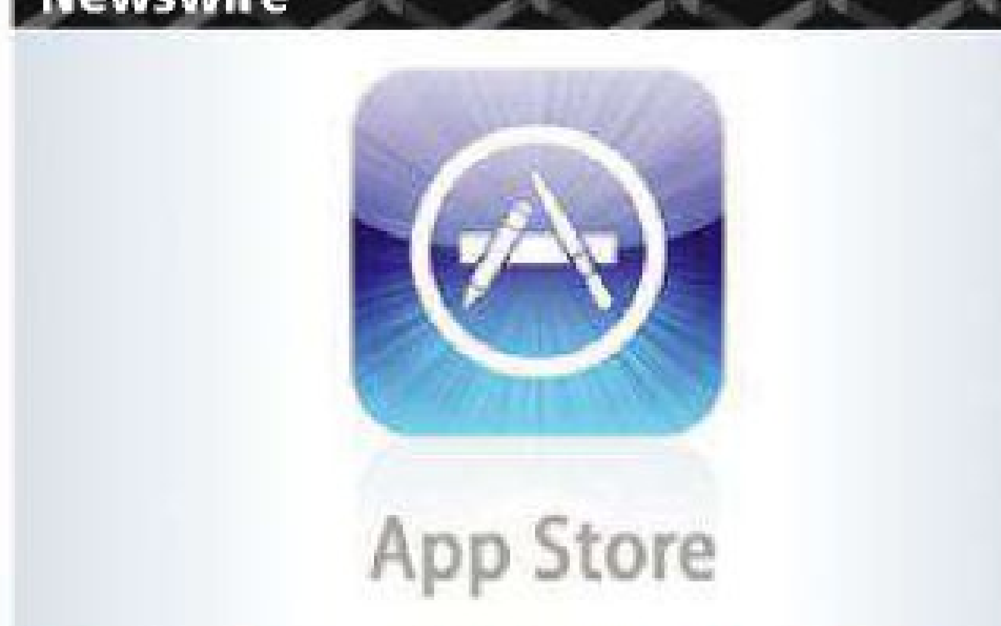
The *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* games require a certain level of technical mastery. Do you think there's a commercial niche for less precise music games, such as an air guitar simulator like the one you've worked on?
People say, "Well, maybe it could detect fingers, and maybe you could play the guitar more accurately if you could detect fingers." I don't think it was ever about that. It was just the feeling of playing air guitar in the same way that when you're playing tennis in *Wii Sports*, it's not looking at the rotation of your hand or accurate position of the racquet. It's just giving you a fun experience, like what you'd imagine it to be; it doesn't have to be an accurate simulation of real life. I don't think it's dumbing the experience down – it's just making it accessible and fun without having to worry about people having to be able to play the real sport or instrument.

What limitations did you encounter while working on the prototype?
When the Kinect device driver was written so it ran on Windows or a Mac, basically it would give you back a depth image, but there was no tracking. There's no skeletal estimation – that's all done in the Xbox. So what you saw in the air guitar prototype was my attempt at trying to estimate and track where someone's hands were.

While I was doing this demo, PrimeSense, the technology company behind what's inside Kinect, released a driver that would enable people to use the camera – and also the new cameras coming from Asus that PrimeSense are working with, which is basically going to be Kinect for PC. And they've also released their skeletal tracking system, so you can stand there and it'll estimate and work out all the points of your body, your legs and things. So, very similar to what it's doing inside the Xbox, you can now do running off the PC.

Do you think that Kinect will inject new life into the music-game genre?
Dance Central is really good. It's one of the best launch titles for Kinect. I think that Harmonix, for example, have probably got a huge amount of ideas that are a lot more experimental. *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* pioneered things that became far more successful in the mainstream than their earlier stuff. Hopefully they'll use this opportunity to go back and do things that are a lot more experimental and more interesting, that are less about simulating real instruments than just using your body in different ways.

Newswire



Microsoft wants slice of Apple pie

Microsoft is challenging Apple's bid to trademark the term 'App Store', which launched in 2008.

In January, Microsoft filed a motion for summary judgement with the US Patent and Trademark Office, claiming it to be a generic term. "Competitors should be free to use 'app store' to identify their own stores," the filing states. "Apple cannot leverage its early success to prevent competitors from using this generic term for their own app stores."

At the time of writing, the status of Apple's application is given as "an opposition is now pending at the Trademark Trial and Appeal board".



INTERVIEW



The Last Story (see p44) sees the player leading a group of mercenaries looking for work in a port city at the edge of a mountainous continent. Sixplayer co-op is expected

The return of the king

One of the founding fathers of the JRPG is back. A return to form, or a last farewell? Hironobu Sakaguchi explains why his career ends with you



Square Enix's tenure as singleplayer RPG overlord can largely be attributed to the groundwork laid by one of its first sons, **Hironobu Sakaguchi** (above). Responsible for creating the *Final Fantasy* series, Sakaguchi cut his directing teeth on the first five instalments, before moving into roles in production and supervision. He's since worked on games such as *Xenogears*, *Parasite Eve* and *Final Fantasy IX*.

His break from Square at the turn of the century saw him remain tied to the RPG with his own studio, Mistwalker. It's taken over 15 years for the master to return to the director's chair with Wii game *The Last Story*, released in late January in Japan.

How does it feel to see your long-in-development *The Last Story* hit gold status?

"I'd like players to create an emotional link to the characters, or to the entire group. I'd like them to feel a huge satisfaction questing with the group – or even feel sadness when it ends"

It's been a very long road that took us almost three-and-a-half years, including a full year of research and development. We had to remake it several times, which you can see in the difference between early designs and the game we have today. The game is gold, but there's still a lot of promotion to be done. My hope is that as many people as possible will give it a try.

It's been a long time since you worked as a full-time director of a game production. How does it feel to be back in the chair?

This time it was very different, as my core objective was to bring something really different to the RPG genre – advancing into the unknown. This time, it wasn't a matter of just being inside the studio, directing, but more a case of constant communication with each member of staff to identify and define the key aspects of the game to meet my objective.

Seeing *The Last Story* in motion, there's a visual representation of aggro from rival NPCs, which is traditionally an element of the MMORPG. Did that genre inspire you?

Yes, it did. I played between 30 and 40 hours of MMORPGs to get to that idea. Actually, many of the team did, taking in various influences while voice chatting in-game. It was a very fun experience that I tried to reproduce in a singleplayer game. Of course, it's hard to translate perfectly offline, but that notion of aggro was something I really wanted to put in the game.

You've said *The Last Story* could, aptly, be your last game, depending on its reception. Now that the game is finished, how do you feel about that?

It's not a question of me wanting to make videogames or not. Of course I want to make more. It's more about the relevance of my work. If too few people like my games, it's a sign that my ideas are from another time. It would mean that my creativity doesn't meet today's tastes and expectations. So it doesn't mean I'll never make a game again, but that I should hold off for a while.

Your games are unified by themes of life and growth – is this also true of *The Last Story*?

I'd like players to create an emotional link to the characters [in *The Last Story*], or to the entire group. I'd like them to feel a huge satisfaction questing with that group – or even feel some sadness when the game ends, as they'll miss them. More than the theme of life, this time it's about friendship.

Continue

New handhelds
We're having additional pockets tailored already

MotionScan
Who's using it next, after Team Bondi's *LA Noire*?

Stephen Fry
Fitting *LBP2*'s tutorials like a pair of comfy old shoes

Quit

Studio shutdowns
Farewell to one of the UK's finest, Bizarre Creations

Some Russian
Stop associating games with real-world events

Battery limitations
Isn't this stuff easier to do than stereoscopic 3D?


StoreMags.com
DRAGON AGE II™
DESTINY WAITS FOR NO ONE.
IN STORES MARCH 11TH
EU.DRAGONAGE.COM
18
www.pegi.info
XBOX 360
XBOX LIVE
PS3
PlayStation 3
PlayStation Network
PC DVD ROM
BIOWARE
EA









EVENT

Corridors of power-ups

We attend the first ever Parliamentary Games Day, and watch consumers, industry figures and MPs play co-operatively

Culture minister Ed Vaizey (above left) and Eidos' Ian Livingstone. As if to prove just how effective the industry's self-representation has been, long-time game critic and Leicester MP Keith Vaz made a momentary appearance, his opinion of Kinect sadly unrecorded

In recent years, elected officials have warmed to gaming. Or, at least, they've toned down the tabloid-baiting rhetoric. The game industry, meanwhile, has managed a surprisingly effective PR campaign, convincing many politicians of the fiscal, and even cultural, value of videogames.

It's not as surprising as it once would have been, then, to find ourselves in the (disappointingly unostentatious) Macmillan Room of Portcullis House, the annexe to the House of Commons overlooking the Thames, as MPs and industry figures sip wine and talk issues over the occasional round of *Kinect Sports*. What is surprising, however, is that the Parliamentary Games Day hasn't been organised by the game industry, but by Gamers' Voice, UK gaming's first – and increasingly outspoken – consumer pressure group.

Gamer's Voice was founded as a Facebook group by Labour MP Tom Watson in 2009, but Watson has subsequently taken a hands-off approach. "He's provided support where he can, but he's a very busy guy," explains Gamer's Voice chairman **Paul Gibson**. "We're a voluntary organisation, but we've been quietly building our infrastructure behind the scenes, making contacts, and this year we're coming out of our shell a bit more. This is sort of the announcement event."

"I think the industry has got a lot better at representing itself… and people are understanding the high value that it generates and how important it is for the UK economy"

Watching MPs and industry figures interact is certainly interesting. Our interview with **Don Foster** (Lib-Dem MP and formerly the party's shadow secretary of state for culture, pictured top centre) is momentarily stalled as he and Eidos life president Ian Livingstone greet each other warmly. But Foster's previous position required familiarity with the industry – can we expect other policymakers to be equally well-versed on the topic? "There are many things that MPs don't have direct personal experience of, but with which they're involved," argues Foster, "but they clearly have a duty to find out about them, and that's one of the benefits of a session like this."

Luciana Berger, Labour Co-Operative MP for Liverpool Wavertree (taking a break from *Sports Champions* and pictured top left), agrees: "[These events] make a massive difference. I think the industry's got a lot better at representing itself, and people are understanding the value it generates, the low-carbon, highly trained jobs that it creates and how important it is for the UK economy."

But if MPs are becoming more open-minded about games, how does the industry feel about MPs? Livingstone – appointed by the government to chair a review into skills and education – is positive about his experiences with the coalition. "This government's been fantastic in leading on the skills agenda," he says. And the tax-break disappointment? "Well, we'll continue to lobby for production tax credits."

Ed Vaizey, culture, communications and creative industries minister, attracts a throng as he tours the room. We ask what it's like to work with game creators. "There's a certain maverick element to the games industry," he says. "Which is a good thing. But I also think the industry has understood now that it's got to engage with policy-makers, and it's doing it in very imaginative ways."

As encouraging as this is, it's important to remember that this night is about consumers, too. We ask Gibson if too much familiarity between his pressure group and the industry might be a bad thing. Might there be issues on which Gamers' Voice and the game industry are opposed?

"Well, we hope not, but it's a distinct possibility. A lot of developers and a lot of publishers have said: 'Look, we'd like to help you out in any way we can.' We've deliberately resisted their assistance for exactly the reason that you point out. It may be that at some point in the future we come up against them."

That conflict may have arrived sooner than expected. At the time of going to press, Gamers' Voice has signalled its intention to report Activision to the Office Of Fair Trading over bugs in the PC and PS3 versions of *Call Of Duty: Black Ops*, an action that has coincided with a fresh call by the group for volunteers.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

We may not be the most gender-balanced hive mind in the world, but we do try to call out sexism when we see it. But an eye-rolling caption here and a snide boxout there aren't always enough. Which is where Go Make Me A Sandwich comes in. Wundergeek's blog – subtitled How Not To Sell Games To Women – is an often witty and always well-argued analysis of the unreconstructed costumes and characters presented to today's game consumers. Her ire isn't directed at game creators alone, though, and the dissections of pieces of fan art that bubble around online prove slightly scary reminders of the way in which certain players respond to some of the imagery that underpins their pastime.

Site:
Go Make Me A Sandwich
URL:
gomakemeasandwich.blogspot.com


StoreMags.com
BULLETSTORM
XOXO
THROBBING HANGOVERS!
DISMEMBERED MAN PARTS!
SPACE PIRATE VENGEANCE!
BULLETSTORM.COM IN STORES 25.02.11
18
www.pegi.info
Games for Windows LIVE
XBOX 360
XBOX LIVE
PS3
PlayStation Network
EPIC
EA
© 2011, People Can Fly Sp. z o.o. All rights reserved. People Can Fly, the People Can Fly logo, Bulletstorm, and the Bulletstorm logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of People Can Fly in the United States of America and elsewhere. Epic, Epic Games, Unreal, the Powered by Unreal logo and the Epic games logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of Epic Games Inc. in the United States of America and elsewhere. EA and the EA logo are trademarks of Electronic Arts Inc. "PlayStation", "PS3" and are trademarks or registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Windows, the Windows Start button, Xbox, Xbox 360, Xbox LIVE, and the Xbox logos are trademarks of the Microsoft group of companies, and "Games for Windows" and the Windows Start button logo are used under license from Microsoft. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

Cannon Fodder 3

FORMAT: **360, PC** PUBLISHER: **GFI**



The miniature brothers in arms are back. This time, the cartoon ultraviolence takes place among 3D destructible environments. Hopes of a release outside Russia are high, but unconfirmed

Monster Hunter Portable 3rd

FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**



Monstrous Japan launch sales and a vast visual improvement stir up our jealous side. Long, starry nights of extinction can't come soon enough – nor can solid confirmation of a western release

Tomb Raider Trilogy Pack

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**



Before the reinvention, a chance to chart Crystal Dynamics' progress so far. HD versions of *Anniversary* and *Legend* join the jewel in the developer's crown, *Underworld*, for this budget bundle

Torchlight II

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **PERFECT WORLD**



More dungeons to raid, more monsters to smash and more loot to grab – but this time bring co-op friends or risk never seeing them again. Most importantly, though, fishing returns

Final Fantasy XIII-2

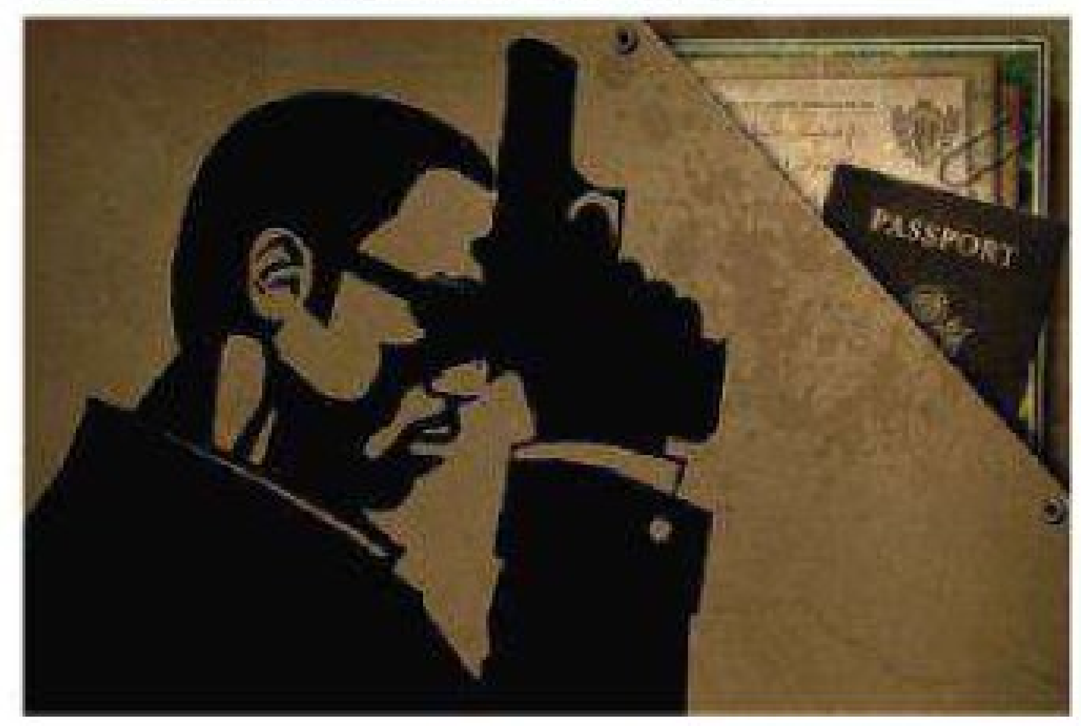
FORMAT: **360, PS3**PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**



A chance to rectify some of *XIII*'s issues? Details are scant thus far, aside from an 'evolved' combat system, a new story that's tied in to its predecessor, and a slight redesign for Lightning

Julius Stiles: The International

FORMAT: **IOS** PUBLISHER: **LAPLAND STUDIOS**



An iOS game "for both the mind-game strategist and the kick-ass special ops warrior-lover," says project collaborator and star Wesley Snipes. He knows he can't download it in prison, right?

Fight Night Champion

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **EA**



EA takes its twin-stick face-rearrangement simulator to the next level, with a fully fleshed-out underdog story steering the blows. Prisons, pugilism, but no sign of power ballads – yet

Yakuza 4

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**



Before we fend off *Of The End*'s zombie invasion, it's time to tie up some loose ends in the city of blinding fights, where Kazuma Kiryu defined his brand of bike-smashing justice

Phantasy Star Eternal Hunters

FORMAT: **MOBILE** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**



Japan's Mobage Town online network gets its second big Sega IP, following *Shenmue City*. A free-to-play treasure hunt that determines monsters and items by your mobile phone's position



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

I Am An Insane Rogue AI

tinyurl.com/rogueai

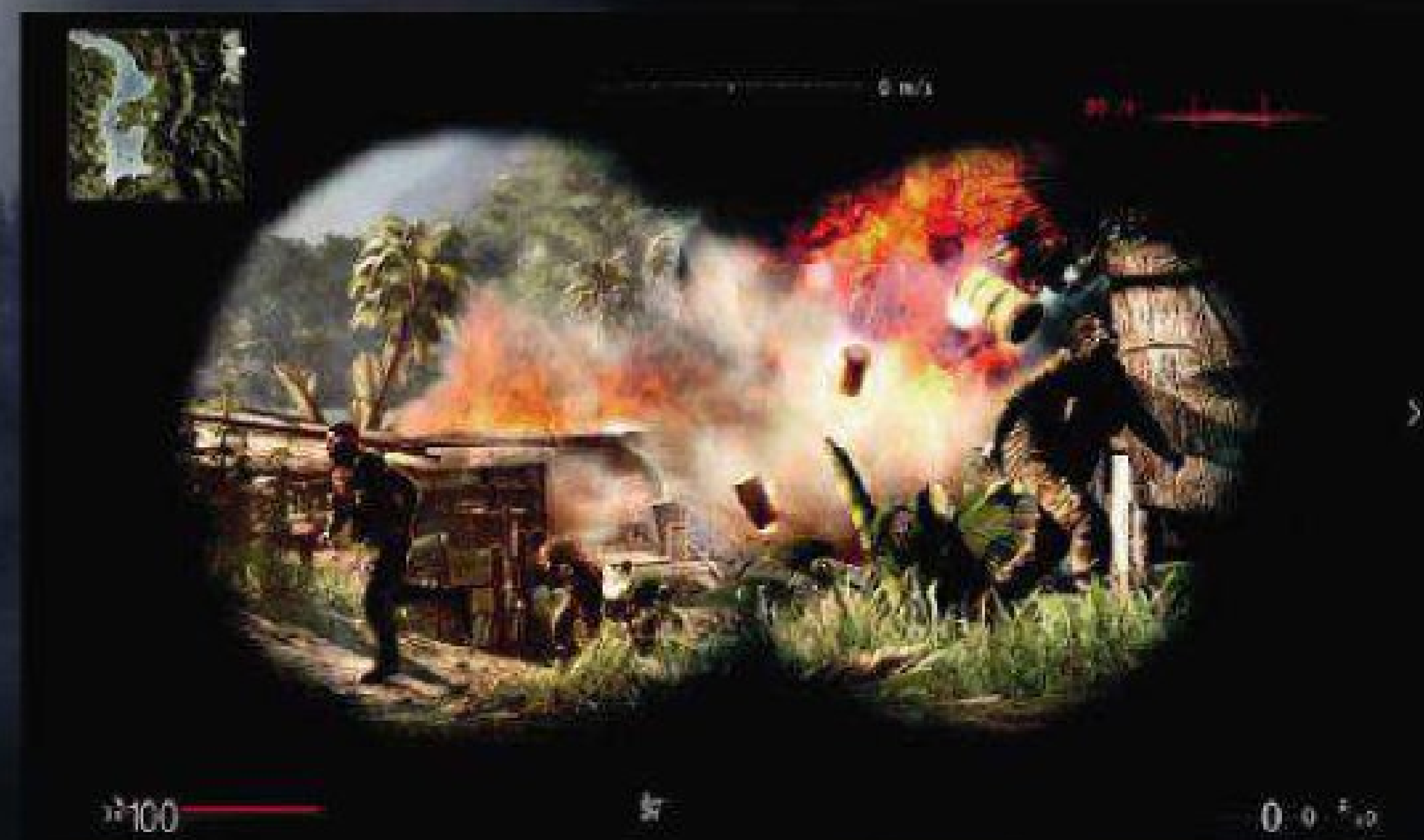
With a mission of one Flash game per month, dedicated creator Nerdook's output has ranged from ambitious and flawed (*Dungeon Developer*) to simple and addictive (*Demons Took My Daughter*). Though the quality and balance has varied, there's been a consistent visual style threading the games together. With this, the designer has finally married bubbly aesthetics to an uncluttered interface for one-click thrills

Taking on the role of the titular rogue AI, you terrorise the scientists wandering the floors below by trapping them with closed doors, mauling them with patrolling bots and electrocuting them with lighting. It's not a base exercise in torture, however: you're rationed points with which to ultimately dominate the building's systems. In practice, it plays out like a remix of tower defence, with a structure that encourages continuous play and careful strategy. Tonally, it riffs on the likes of PopCap and Double Fine, and, as with those studios' quirky works, it's the personality as much as the mechanics that makes it such a draw.



SNIPER: GHOST WARRIOR

City Interactive sets its sights on PS3 and aims squarely for the head



As its title makes abundantly clear, *Sniper: Ghost Warrior* stands apart from the raft of firstperson shooters on the market by casting the solitary long-distance warrior as its star. While its peers only occasionally put scoped rifles in the hands of players to mix up pacing – as brief distractions from the up-close-and-personal assault sections that comprise the bulk of their action – this is the first true sniper experience to be released on PlayStation 3.

The game casts players as part of an elite special forces unit dispatched to the politically tremulous Isla Trueno, tasked with assisting rebel forces in overthrowing the military junta that recently seized control of the region in a bloody coup. Campaign missions veer from long-range sniper battles to close-range assault to help guerillas restore order to Isla Trueno.

The upcoming PlayStation 3 release of *Sniper: Ghost Warrior* builds significantly on the Xbox 360 and PC versions released last year. Unfinished Business, a set of three missions that pick up the story from the end of the regular campaign, includes a series of one-on-one sniper duels, one tasking players with taking down an enemy helicopter with a single shot.

Multiplayer mode has been improved and expanded upon, with five Xbox 360 DLC maps included as standard, the addition of Capture The Flag and an all-new, intense Hardcore mode, which ramps up the atmosphere with the HUD stripped entirely from the screen. The PS3 version also boasts two new weapons in campaign and multiplayer.

In a crowded FPS marketplace, *Sniper: Ghost Warrior* stands apart, its focus on the solitary, often lonely role of the sniper delivering a unique experience. With the PS3 version building on 2010's original in almost every way, fans of scoped gunplay will be eagerly awaiting its release.

Sniper: Ghost Warrior is developed by City Interactive and is released for PS3 on March 24.







Players make use of varied weapons, including the legendary Soviet Snayperskaya Vintovka Dragunova, the Accuracy International AS50, Heckler & Koch MSG-90 and SR-25, as well as Claymores, C4 charges and throwing knives

Industry FOCUS

In association with Screen Digest

Cuts and casualties: the game industry realigns

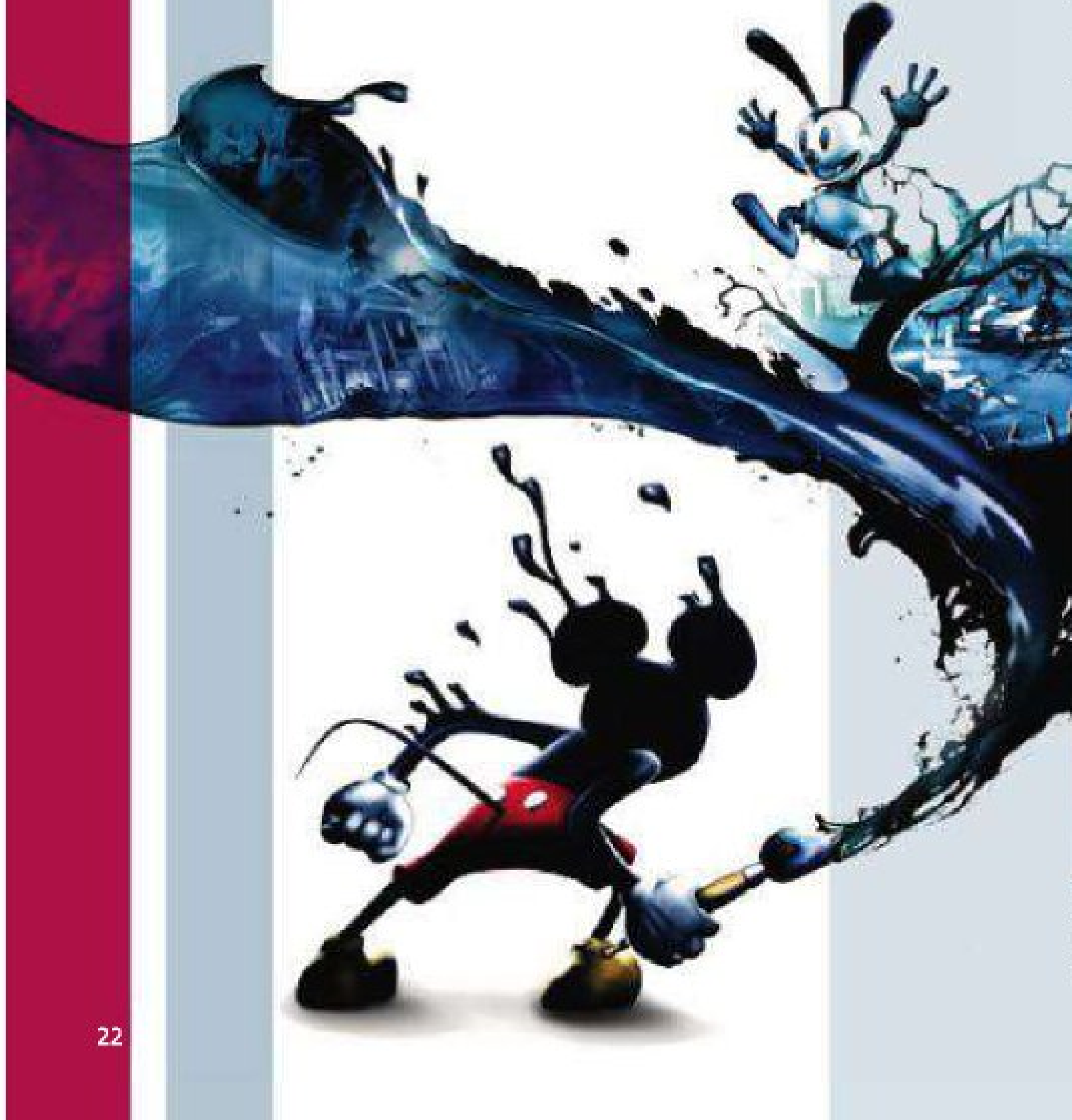
Piers Harding-Rolls examines emerging challenges to a game industry in transition

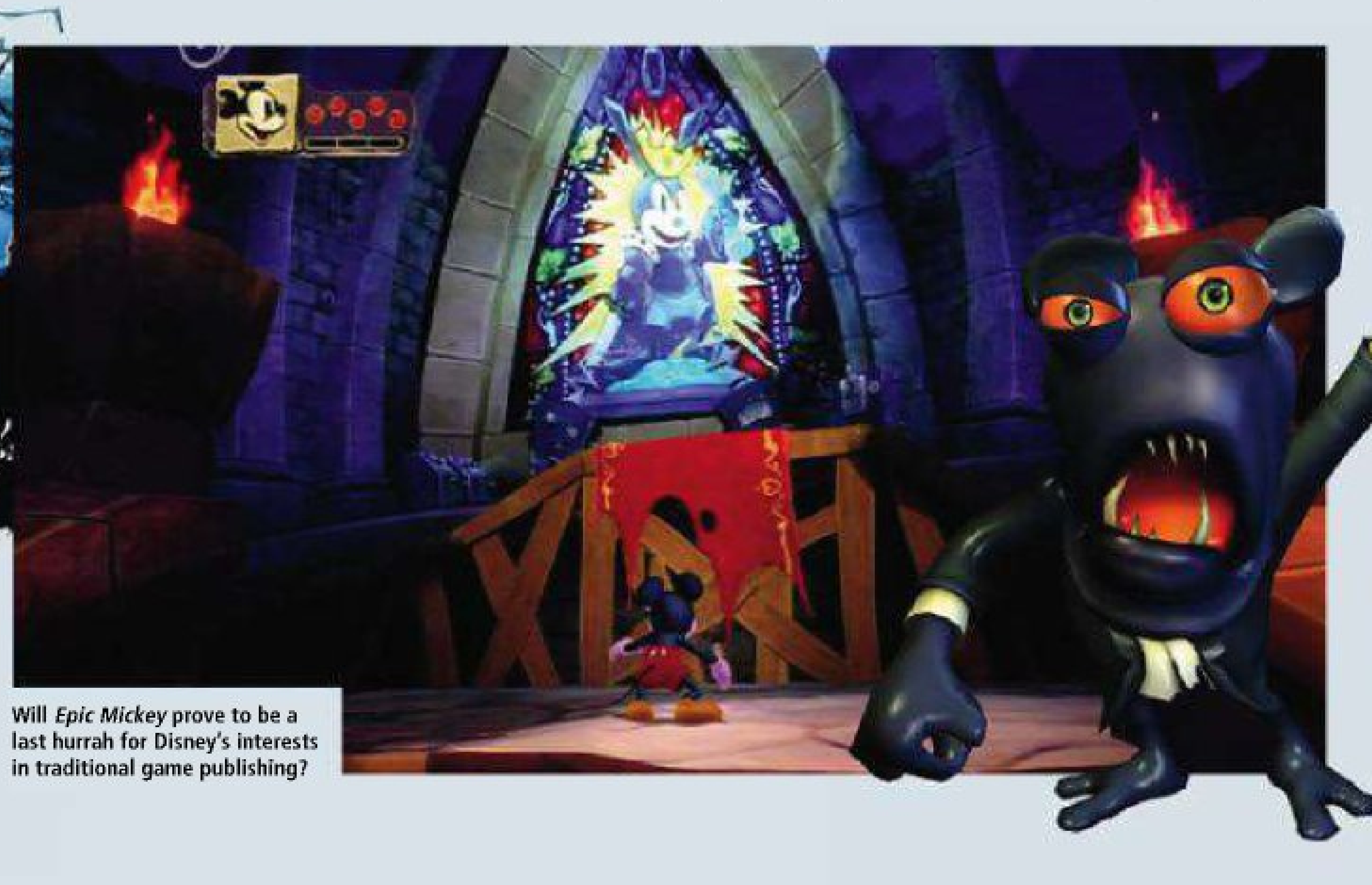
Most gamers, unless they've been stuck under a rock, are aware of the rapidly changing state of games distribution, enabled and driven by the penetration of broadband access technologies and the resultant uptake of connected devices and online platforms. This dynamic has resulted in a substantial shift of power in the games content value chain away from publishers and their retail partner gatekeepers, and placed that power into the hands of small content creators and startups.

While this transition opens up opportunities for self-publishing, it also brings with it challenges for the traditional games industry and new market entrants alike. On a simple level, traditional companies are actively realigning their strategies with the growing digital and mobile opportunities – not an easy task for companies with heavy infrastructures dedicated to producing large, expensively packaged games. This is the process that Disney's games business has gone through in recent weeks. Following the acquisition of Playdom, the social network game company, Disney has made a concerted decision to downsize its console and PC game-based publishing business and invest more heavily in a streamlined online opportunity. This choice saw the company shed 200 staff.

Digital and mobile game startups and independents face other challenges, including monetisation of the audience, hyper-competition, very quickly evolving markets, copycat content, discoverability challenges and increasing costs in areas such as customer acquisition, central services (which will grow as sectors mature), content creation, and billing and payment, to name just a few. While there is certainly profit to be made, first movers are generally better positioned to compete, and the many moving parts to consider when tackling these digital opportunities make business execution a difficult science. On the flip side, this sort of business environment promotes innovation.

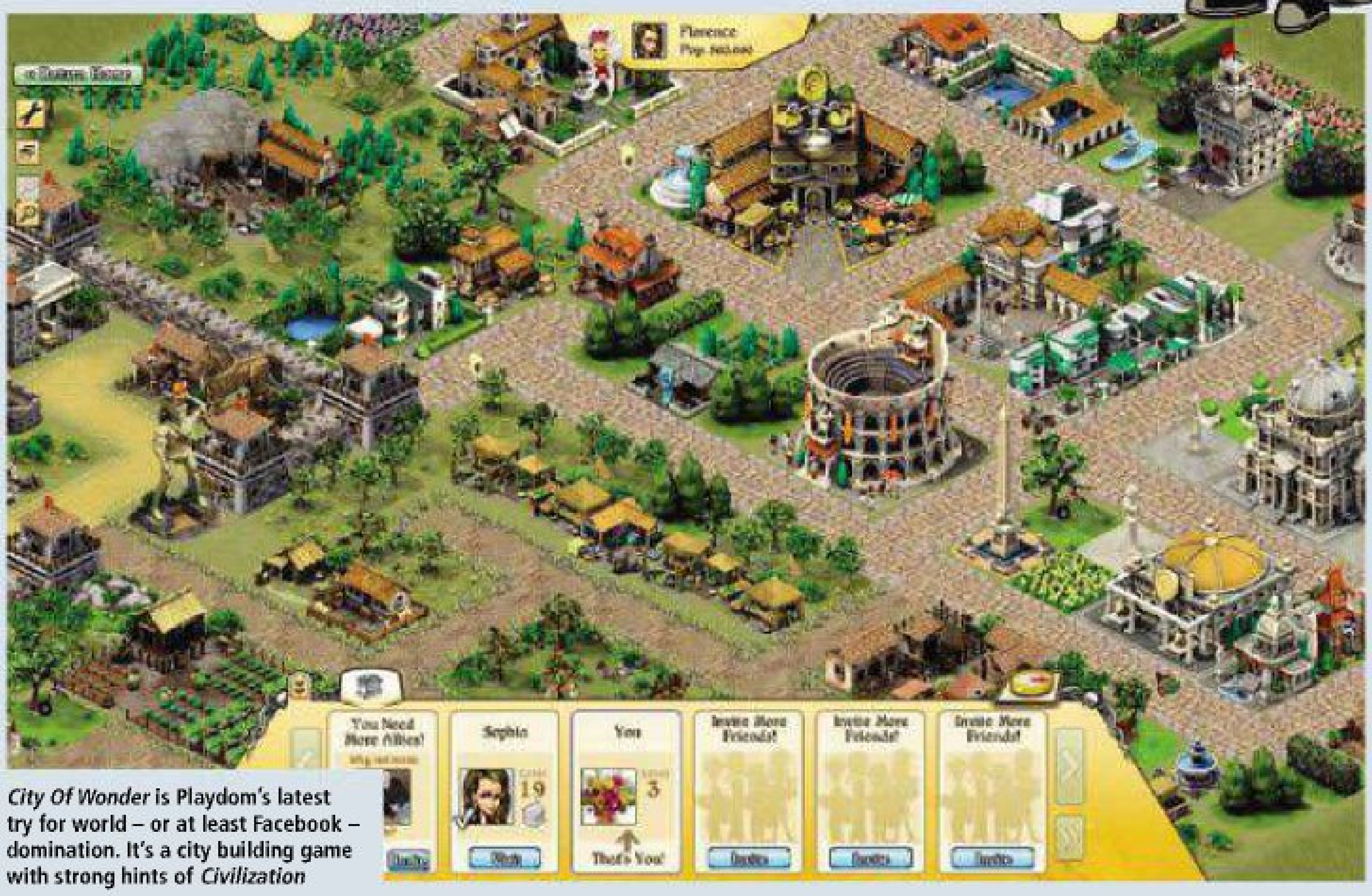
There are at least three different dimensions to the process of realignment for traditional publishers, which gives us a good indication of how changes may impact the shape and size of the overall industry. Firstly, the fragmented nature of digital and mobile opportunities, which are made up of many different slices of market (MMOG, PC





Will *Epic Mickey* prove to be a last hurrah for Disney's interests in traditional game publishing?





City Of Wonder is Playdom's latest try for world – or at least Facebook – domination. It's a city building game with strong hints of *Civilization*







The publishers of *Costume Quest* (THQ), *Dead Space 2* (EA) and *World Of Warcraft* (Activision Blizzard) will be watching Disney's post-Playdom reshuffle with interest

casual, social network games, games on demand, console downloads, mobile apps and so on) – and the actual sizes of these many slices – will mean that delivering comparable scale for larger companies will be a challenge for the foreseeable future. This means that publishers will need to examine their fixed costs closely and will be forced, like Disney, to eject some of these costs to make profitable inroads into digital opportunities.

Publishers will need to examine their fixed costs closely and will be forced, like Disney, to eject some of these costs to make profitable inroads into digital opportunities

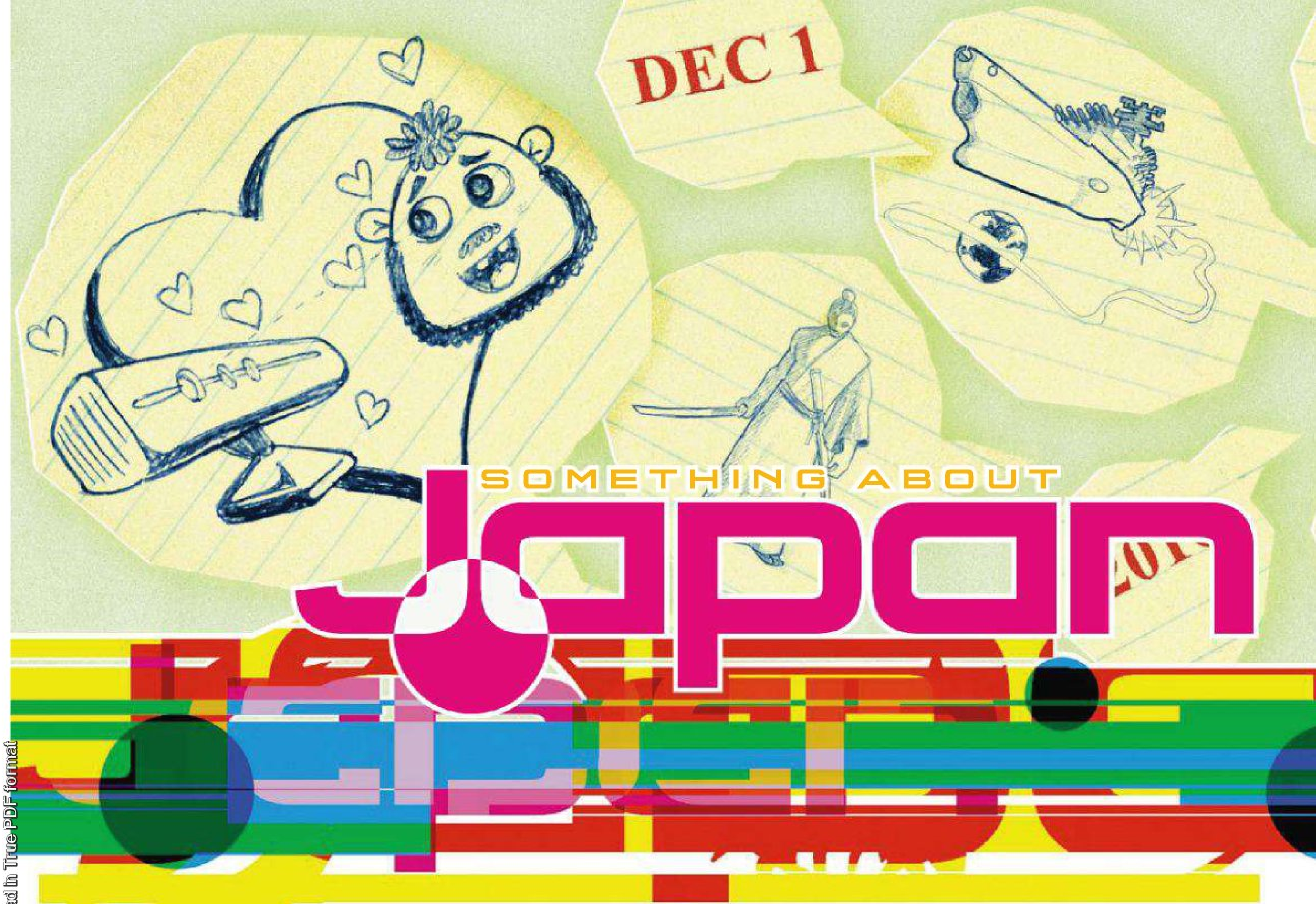
Secondly, publishers that want to maintain their scale as much as possible will have to manage a two-speed business: one that serves the declining packaged console and PC game business on one hand, and one that's streamlined for the digital marketplace on the other. A substantial problem continues to surround this aspect of the transition for these companies. As traditional publishing is a scale business, I assume that there comes a point during the transition when the scale of revenue is such that it's unable to support the traditional publishing functions of the company profitably. How this process is managed is key to the future of the companies going through this change.

For a company such as Disney this is less of an issue – it's not a pure play publisher, and it doesn't have much more than mid-tier exposure to console and PC game publishing. It has a much larger overall business. For pure play publishers, such as EA, Ubisoft, Activision Blizzard and THQ, the challenge is more significant.

Thirdly, traditional publishers now have to reinvent their business to compete with nimble startups and independents in the digital and mobile space. Acquisition of existing companies helps, but these must be aligned to accommodate changes in skills, reorganisation of centralised services and speed of development.

Overall, then, the industry is going through unprecedented and accelerated change, which is throwing up solid, profitable opportunities – but also many challenges. One clear aspect, though, is that as we move to a leaner, streamlined games business, the industry as a whole is likely to become less centralised, more dispersed and fragmented. We'll see jobs lost in formalised roles within publishers, while startups and independents will multiply. This has implications for the makeup of the industry workforce, with the likelihood that it will become smaller, certainly in the short and medium timeframe.

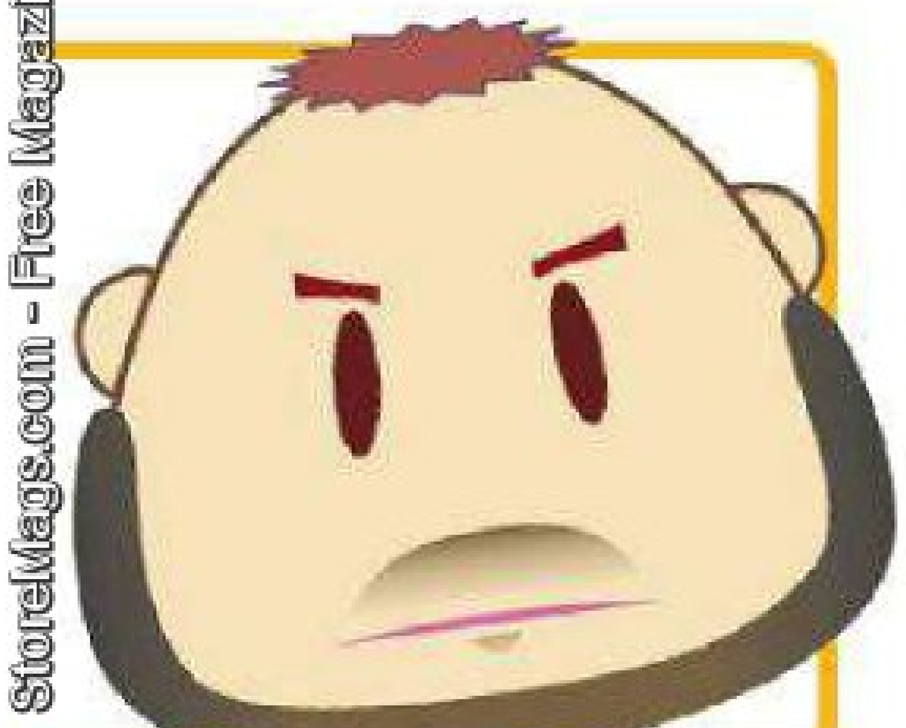




SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

Too old for games, too young to play

Brick Bardo takes a fleeting look back as he steps into a brave new world



I keep a diary. Flicking through my most recent entries – going back to December – I was reminded of how much has changed in such a short space of time, and of a common theme that's haunted me recently.

At the start of December my DS began to struggle. It's getting old, and the built-in battery is fading away. Maybe it knows the 3DS is coming along to replace it – but I still like my GBA games so I won't be giving it up any time soon. A waitress saw me using it and thought it was a newly released model – it's that old. I guess appearances don't always match up with reality.

I made a note of two trips to the cinema. One was to see Space Battleship Yamato, about the last days of a futuristic battleship; it has elements of the US TV remake of Battlestar Galactica. People are really excited about Yamato, saying it shows off Japanese special effects expertise. The thing is, it doesn't even compare with Hollywood blockbusters. The other film was called Saigo No Chusingura, and is what we call a Jidaigeki – a period film. It's the true story of Chushingura, the 47 ronin. It's apparently going to receive a US release, but I'm not sure how it'll be received without firm knowledge of the story. It's far better than Space Battleship Yamato, anyway.

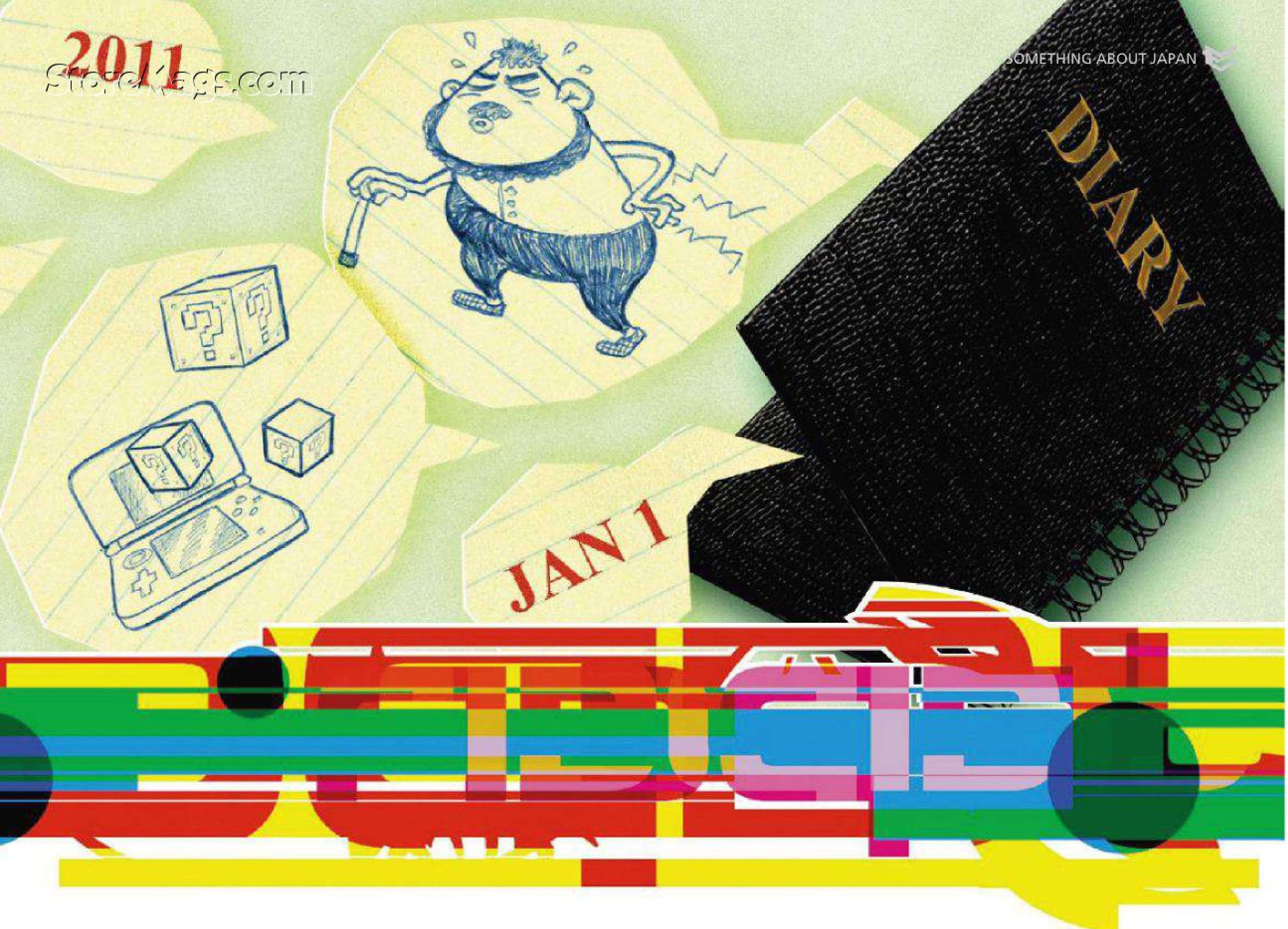
Jumping ahead a few entries, I made a note that the Tokyo federal authorities passed a law against the representation of youths in an improper manner within the media (manga, animation and games). Today, the fight is not over. The major publishing groups, animation studios, mangakas and creators are resisting.

Currently, in addition to Tokyo, the neighbouring prefecture of Kanagawa is preparing its own law as well. Once again it is about the way minors are depicted and behave in society, but it's a more comprehensive approach. It covers not only the way they are depicted or used in various media but also access to alcohol, curfews and sexual activities. Kanagawa's approach has one big problem: it's targeting people aged under 30. If you're 29 years old, then you're subject to it. It seeks to regulate nightclubs and the sex trade, but I worry it could be used to crack down on manga and even gaming. Anyway… back to the games.

The shows unveiling DS and Wii had attendance figures of around 80,000 – this time it was only 30,000. Are people unaware of 3DS? Is there so little public interest? Retailers don't even seem to be conducting pre-order campaigns

I played *Fallout: New Vegas* and liked it. It's well made and lots of fun, but it's very much more of the same. But, hey, at least I don't live in Kanagawa prefecture, where I wouldn't even be able to play it!

In December I also managed to get my hands on Kinect. Hatsune Miku, the singing synthesiser software with its female lead character, has been adapted to work with Kinect on a PC, and it makes for a great combination. It may not equal



professional software, but an amateur creator could make wonderful use of it.

I also start using Komi Po!, software that lets you make manga (without any artistic talent) on a PC. The resolution is great for the internet but too poor for print. The creators have limited a lot of the features to broaden the audience, but if you want to appear to be a manga creator, then this is for you.

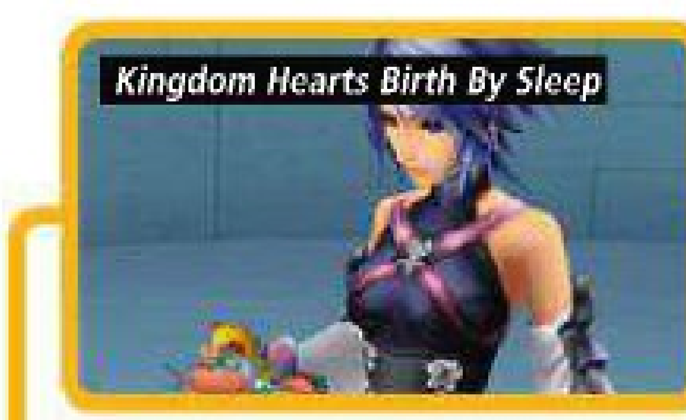
On New Year's Eve I hit the bars with friends and, on my way home, I went to a temple. This is a tradition in Japan – you go to the temple to say farewell to the year and welcome the new one in. The big bell is hit 108 times. I queued with everyone else to deliver one of the hits and as I waited I asked a temple representative when they thought the 108 would be finished. I was told there was no limit – it's not literal. This unsettled me, bringing to mind that recurring theme: appearances not measuring up to reality.

Well into the new year, and the 3DS ad campaign has really got fired up, but with only two months to launch I felt the exposure was low. There has been no in-game footage – possibly due to the difficulty in reproducing it on a standard 2D TV.

The Nintendo private show kicked off, too, but although previous shows unveiling DS and Wii had attendance figures of around 80,000, this time it only amounted to 30,000. Are people just unaware of 3DS? Is there really so little public interest? Retailers don't seem to be conducting any pre-order campaigns, either. I find the Japanese launch line-up a bit underwhelming, to be honest. Just one title from Nintendo – *Nintendogs & Cats* – why no *Zelda* or *Pilotwings*?

Towards the end of January I once again went back to Kinect, and once again it was for more motion -capture fun. I feel like Ultraman as I move and parade around in front of it!

And there we have it, a year gone and a new one in progress. I'm not entirely sure what the lessons from 2010 are, but I'm sure they're linked to that common theme I'm reminded of by my latest entry: 'My back aches. Get more exercise. I'm not as young as I think I am'.


Kingdom Hearts Birth By Sleep


Ni No Kuni

Mediacreate Japanese sales, January 17-23

Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales

1. ***Kingdom Hearts: Birth By Sleep Final Mix*** (Square Enix, PSP): 77,000 (NE)
2. ***Monster Hunter Portable 3rd*** (Capcom, PSP): 43,000 (4,095,000)
3. ***Donkey Kong Returns*** (Nintendo, Wii): 20,000 (755,000)
4. ***Kaiju Busters Powered*** (BNG, DS): 18,000 (NE)
5. ***AKB 1/48*** (BNG, PSP): 13,000 (352,000)
6. ***Ni No Kuni*** (Level-5, DS): 13,000 (451,000)
7. ***Inazuma Eleven 3*** (Level-5, DS): 12,000 (378,000)
8. ***Pokémon Black & White*** (Pokémon Company, DS): 12,000 (5,040,000)
9. ***Wii Party*** (Nintendo, Wii): 11,000 (1,757,000)
10. ***Venus & Braves*** (BNG, PSP): 11,000 (NE)

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Shadows Of The Damned



Even if Suda 51's skewed take on demon killing produces nothing more than the gaming equivalent of Tarantino's From Dusk Till Dawn, it's guaranteed to be stylish as hell.
360, PS3, EA

The Last Guardian



Yep, it's here once more – but not for much longer. This is the year we get to fall under Ueda's melancholic spell all over again. But will there be giant Lightsabers this time?
PS3, SCE

Child Of Eden



A recent late-night blast on *Rez HD* left our fingers tapping to a beat no one else can hear. We need a motion-controlled journey through human emotion just to level out.
360, PS3, UBISOFT

MMOnwards

Making online multiplayer even more massive



***DC Universe Online*'s console-friendly design makes it distinct from many MMOGs, but this is still a world of levels, inventories and instances – couldn't more be done with a persistent world and expansive, networked userbase?**

It's difficult to evaluate an MMOG – a genre which, more than any other, is shaped by its community, and populated by games which evolve and metamorphose over time. That's why you'll find our thoughts on *DC Universe Online* – based on extensive play with the game as it currently stands – over the page, and not in Review.

Making an MMOG isn't easy, either. The past decade saw the rise and further rise of the genre among the PC gaming community. But as well the success stories, there are tales of failure, free-to-play hybridisation and a huge amount of patching, tinkering and toiling as developers found their feet. One thing is certain, though: the PC, with its connected audience, has ruled the massively multiplayer roost for some time.

Whether you blame casual playing trends or the barriers to monetisation on consoles, the fact remains that no console game has managed the equivalent of *WOW*'s continual success on PC. Whether *DCUO* will be the game to buck this trend is uncertain – what is clear, though, is that the game's combat system – with its heavy focus on physics-powered tactility – works well with a pad, a crucial starting point for a game trying to move the MMOG away from its home turf. Over the coming months we'll see if Sony's console audience can be persuaded to commit to a subscription-based game.

Bluehole's *TERA*, by contrast, is more conventional – chiefly looking to achieve PC success through Unreal Engine 3-powered technical superiority. It's a brute-force approach to overcoming the competition, for underneath the prettiness *TERA* retains a rather conventional MMOG structure (the beta might be in Korean, but the familiar sight of an exclamation mark over an NPC's head transcends language). It's an astute way of appealing to those tiring of *WOW*'s ageing engine, but not those searching for a fresher game.

With free-to-play models increasing in prominence, the options available to a studio looking to experiment with the formula have never been greater. Yet most developers are content to make only minor diversions from the norm. The key to future MMOG success may lie in a radical rethink of the genre but, for now at least, that's a quest few developers seem willing to accept.

FORMAT: **PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SOE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW**

DC Universe Online

The Justice League is ready for action, but is SOE's latest a hero or a villain?







Defeat, followed by frantic regrouping and eventual victory: in the comics, Batman always wins the day by building on his own, often brutal, experiences, and it's tempting to see something of that particular heroic narrative at work in the dealings of SOE. With the primitive glories of *EverQuest* behind it, the veteran online developer has tried harder than most to find space for its games in the post-*WOW* MMOG world, teasing fantasy-weary players with glimpses of *The Agency*'s classy globe-trotting espionage, and suckering in the kids with the sugary easy-access charms of *Free Realms*. In *DC Universe Online*, the studio's wheeling out a priceless licence – but a familiar collection of capes, cowls, tights and grappling hooks are hardly SOE Austin's only asset.

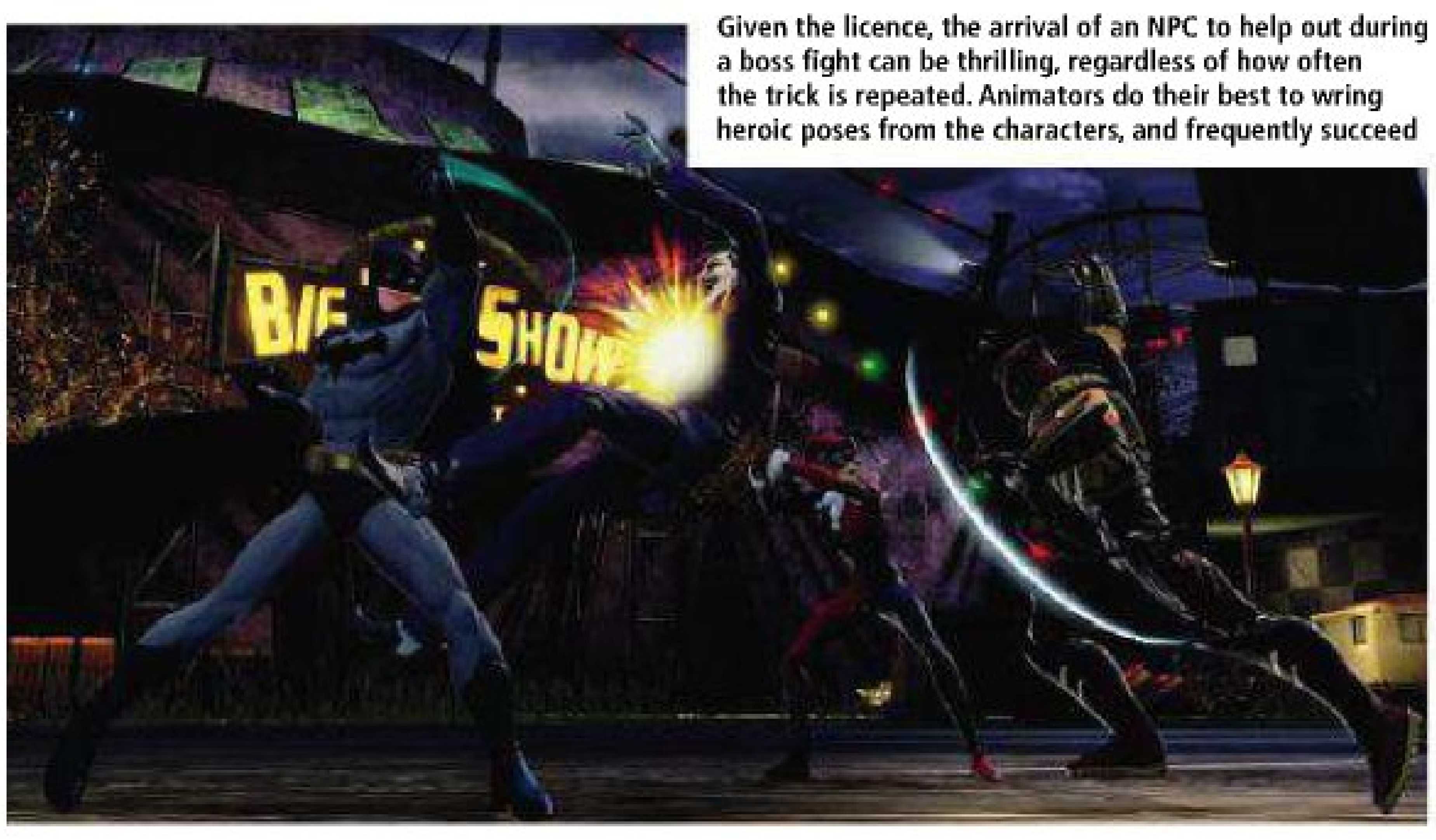
Crucially, the design team has remembered to bring physics along for the ride, filling the often juddering and weightless worlds of server-based games with bouncing barrels and rupturing crates. It's an approach that goes far beyond offering pleasant knick-knacks to smash, however: combat in *DCUO* has a rare sense of heft and impact, enlivened by crunchy hand-to-hand brawling, typhoon blasts that yank distant enemies towards the pummelling zone, or chilly area attacks that can freeze foes into chiselled blocks of cartoon ice before a +10 biker boot sends them skidding towards the horizon. This is that rare online fighting experience in which you'll swear you can almost feel each blow, that rare RPG where your starter stats don't leave you flailing around, entirely weak and helpless.

Such a kinetic approach to battling fits well with a game that bears the hallmarks of something that can't be found inside the Havok engine. SOE's years of toil with vast online projects are on display almost everywhere in this solidly crafted world, its hard-won skills visible in the elegant loot curves, charismatic raid areas and tempting thickets of upgrade trees. Faction safe houses might be formless, echoing, disorienting sprawls at present, but they're the jarring exception rather than the rule, as *DCUO*'s open spaces tend to be both pretty and surprisingly detailed, and almost all of the chunky and generous instances balance a clear path to the boss, with some pleasant looting and exploration along the way.

And, yes, it helps that, everywhere you go, the developer is wringing the most from the DC licence, with a new player's first steps on to the dark, rain-dappled streets of Gotham City making for a particularly astonishing experience. Proximity to Crime Alley can work wonders when it comes to enlivening grinding, while scavenging and selling basic loot doesn't feel quite so menial when you're doing it in the shadow of the WayneTech building, with the flickering ghost of the Bat Signal haunting the clouds overhead. Metropolis, meanwhile, offers players a blazing city of eternal morning to quest within, its utopian skyline and open parkland filled with smooth art-deco curves.

Despite early misgivings, the players fit in to all this pristine real estate surprisingly snugly. The big names may be reserved for the NPCs, and the character-creation tools

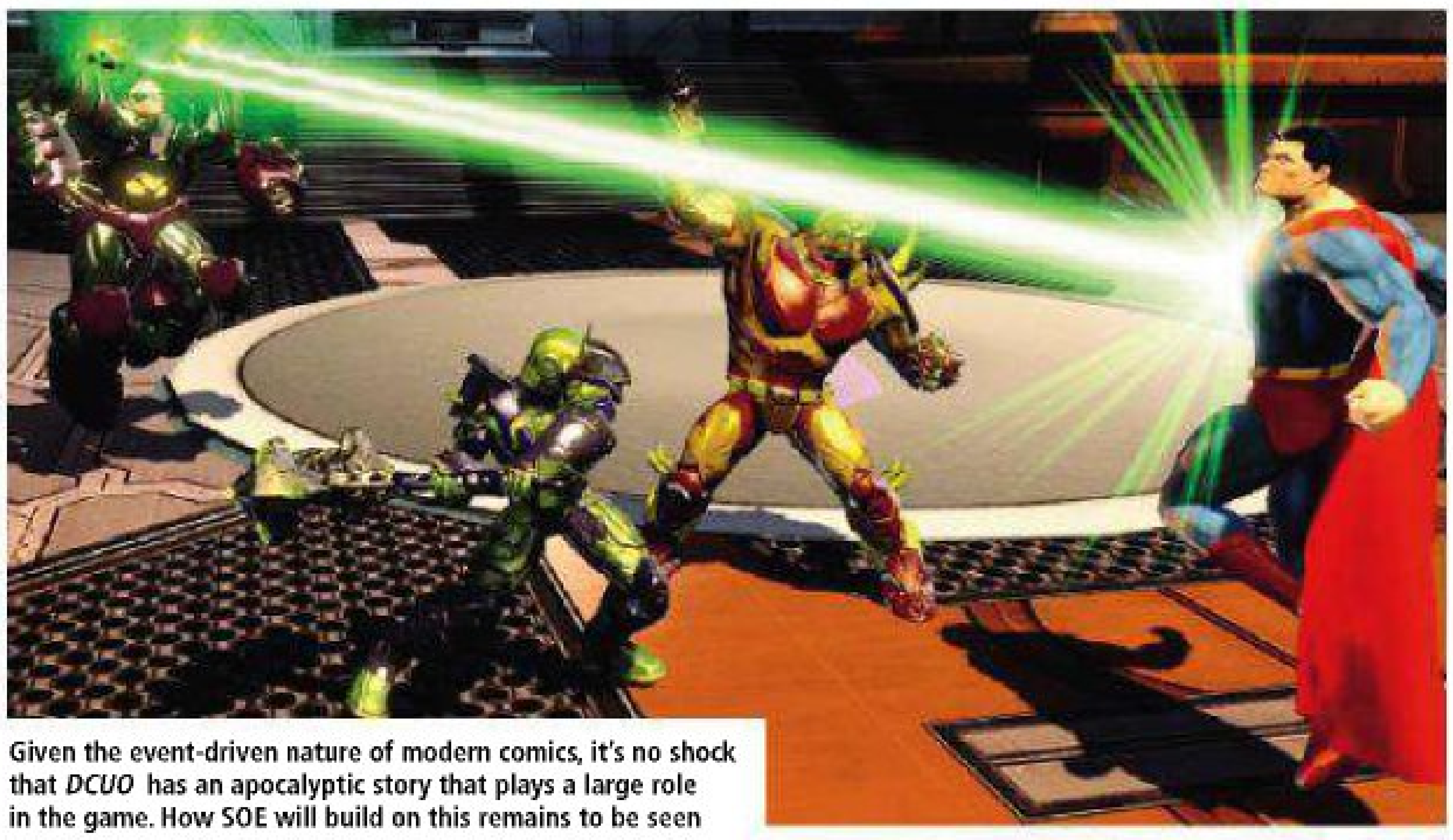
Given the licence, the arrival of an NPC to help out during a boss fight can be thrilling, regardless of how often the trick is repeated. Animators do their best to wring heroic poses from the characters, and frequently succeed





It can be hard to balance character choices in most MMOGs, and here heroes and villains are offered the chance to be mentored by Batman or the Joker respectively. Tough choice





Given the event-driven nature of modern comics, it's no shock that *DCUO* has an apocalyptic story that plays a large role in the game. How SOE will build on this remains to be seen



They could be heroes

DC's iconic heroes and villains turn up as everything from quest-givers to raid bosses and AI battle partners throughout the course of the game, with the real elite reserved as mentor choices for both factions. For those who want to try on the famous capes and cowls for themselves, however, the *DCUO* Legends system allows players a chance to engage in a series of PvP matches playing as specific characters. With new legends unlocked as you level upwards and explore the world, it's a welcome distraction from the weighty business of trying to actually make a name for yourself.

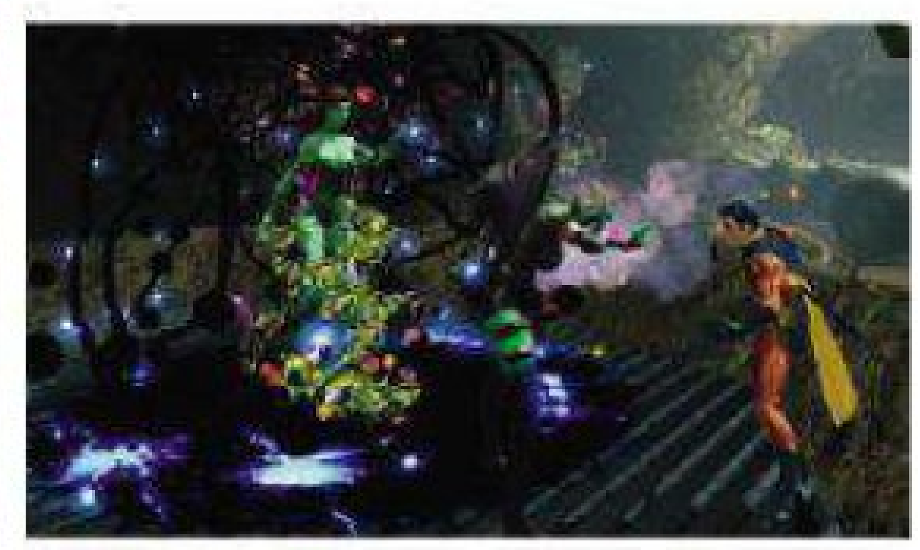
Selling basic loot doesn't feel quite so menial when you're doing it in the shadow of the WayneTech building, with the flickering Bat Signal haunting the clouds overhead

might seem limited and rather po-faced if you're used to the standards set – in this area, at least – by Cryptic's frisky four-colour comic-book games, but a choice of faction, appearance, powers, mentor and travel method (flying is, unsurprisingly, an overwhelming favourite at the moment) will still leave you feeling suitably magnificent from the off, and the fiction elegantly explains away the sudden influx of superheroes and arch villains by making it entirely central to the plot.

Yet if the dazzle and clash of erupting particles that ensues whenever a brawl kicks off certainly means that *DCUO* is not likely to be confused with too many other MMOGs during a fight, on a mechanical level SOE's design is a little more familiar. Quest structures are recycled fairly quickly in the early hours of the game – although the comic-book plotting does a decent job of threading menial tasks together into coherent chunks of narrative, well tailored for both heroes and villains. PC players in particular may feel that some of the tantalising depths of the best MMOGs are absent for the time being, and that the lack of crafting and the streamlined combat options suggest a game that's been created primarily with a DualShock in mind.

With a mere 30 levels' worth of largely solo-friendly questing, plus some more elaborate end-game raid content, SOE's latest might currently reflect a little of the flimsiness of comic books as well as their colour and personality. Yet it's hard not to come to the conclusion that the Austin team has created an extremely promising framework to build upon. As an action game, this is a surprisingly tactical button-masher; as an MMOG, there's plenty to indicate that *DCUO* is punchy enough to make a name for itself in the months ahead. Batman would be proud.







When suitably levelled up, elemental attacks allow for some elegant effects, and unpredictable carnage. Fire might be more immediately rewarding, but ice's physics are more playful. Mark Hamill, James Marsters, Adam Baldwin, Dwight Schultz and Will Wheaton are all confirmed to be supplying voice acting

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **WARNER BROS**
DEVELOPER: **DAY 1 STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MAY**

FEAR 3

Co-op gets ghoulish, thanks to Point Man and Fettel (deceased)





The shelves of this warehouse hold secrets, including satanic altars filled with blood-red candles. Day 1 has a definite knack for juxtaposing the familiar with the bizarre

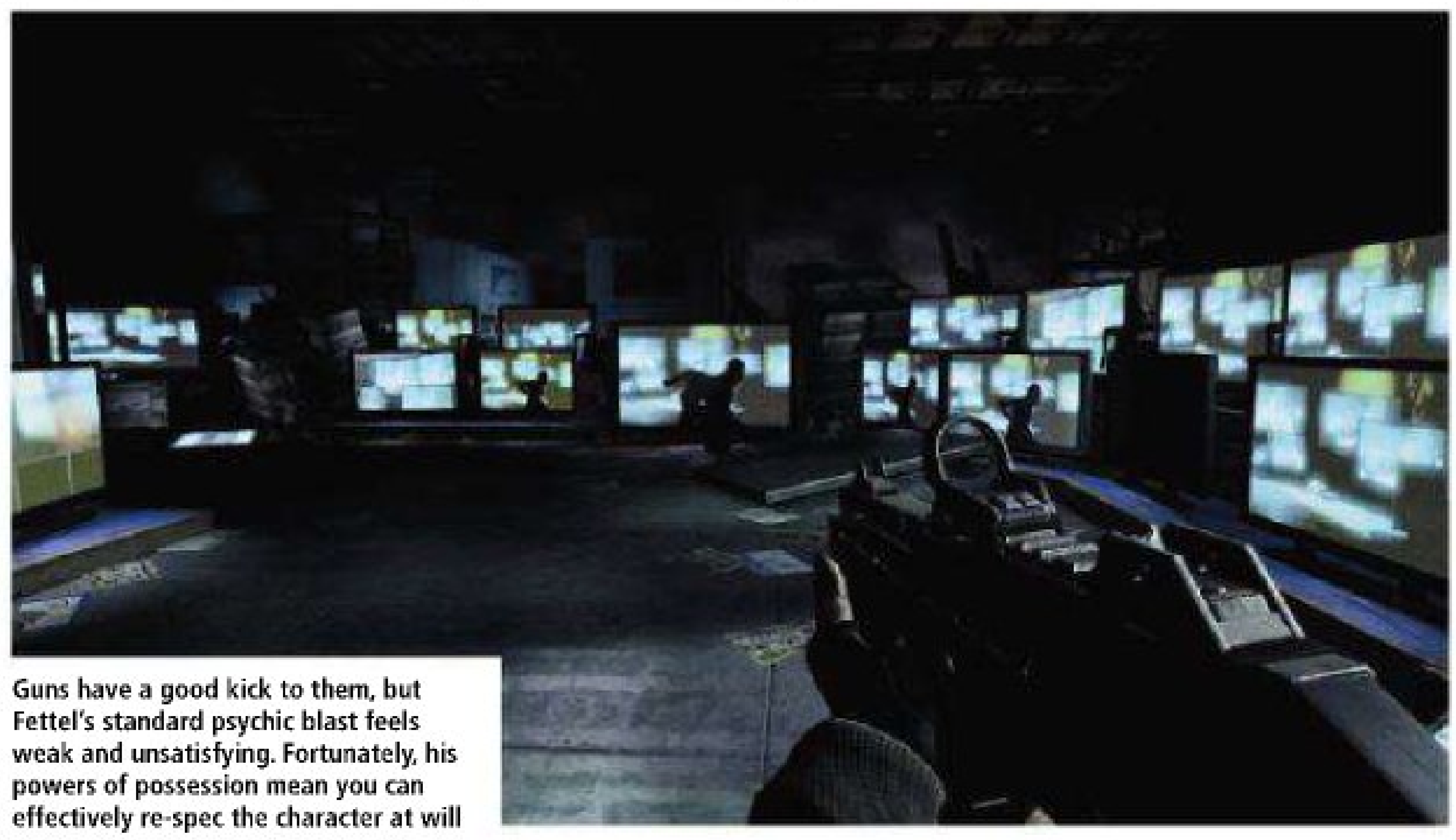
The most promising indicator of *FEAR 3*'s ambitions doesn't lie with the asymmetric co-op, reconfigured combat or shift to a fresh developer. Rather, it's found in the choice of setting for the game's most recent showing. Ignoring the usual run of haunted tower blocks or spooky military installations, Day 1 Studios' latest tips players into a thinly fictionalised mix of Ikea and Currys, and then sets out to scare them any way it can.

Granted, a lot of what follows comes down to a blend of *Half-Life 2*'s artful grime and *BioShock*'s Grand Guignol theatricality, but it's still a bold attempt to seek out new sources of horror in the least likely of places. It works, too: warehouse racks filled with flat-pack furniture prove a surprisingly good split-level stalking ground for terrors real and imagined, while an empty corridor lit by blinking overheads becomes a lot more frightening when it's filled with drifting shopping trolleys. And, once the game's grisly villains finally lay off the hide-and-seek and actually attack, the whole event is staged brilliantly in the modern-day equivalent of a sideshow's hall of mirrors – a labyrinthine display of flatscreen TVs, where fleeting shadows are glimpsed first inside the screens and then outside, before an angry tangle of arms and legs erupts from a hidden monster closet.

Once the combat genuinely does kick off, it's a lot more intimate than normal, with *FEAR*'s previous tendency to keep enemies safely behind the barrel of a gun replaced by more dynamic foes who rise up from the fog inches away from you, drop suddenly from overhead ceiling tiles, or emerge – in, admittedly, a faintly ridiculous fashion – from the frosty confines of a nearby ice-cream freezer. It's hard to tell if Day 1 has inherited Monolith's peculiar knack for intelligent squad AI, but old tricks like Point Man's bullet-time abilities prove just as useful when you're dodging an oncoming axe handle as when you're lining up a shot from the other side of the road.

There are new tricks, too, in the form of Fettel, Point Man's murdered brother (things are probably a bit touchy, since it was Point Man himself who did the murdering), who provides the other playable character. Available in either singleplayer or co-op (although, interestingly, if you're soloing the game as either of them, Day 1 drops your partner out for everything but cutscene one-liners), Fettel's considerably more fragile than his flesh-and-blood counterpart, but makes up for that with some ghostly tricks of his own, ranging from a simple psychic blast to the ability to possess enemies or yank them out of cover and hold them aloft for his brother to riddle with holes.

Granted, psychokinesis may be less useful when you're playing alone with nobody to join in on your double-teaming, but possession, at least, seems distinctly promising. Zipping inside an enemy gives you all of their powers – so there's a tactical element to choosing between one of the melee-based 'cultists' or an SMG-armed soldier – but slaps a time-limit on your out-of-body experience, which you can only extend by killing other humans and collecting their life force. It encourages an entirely new



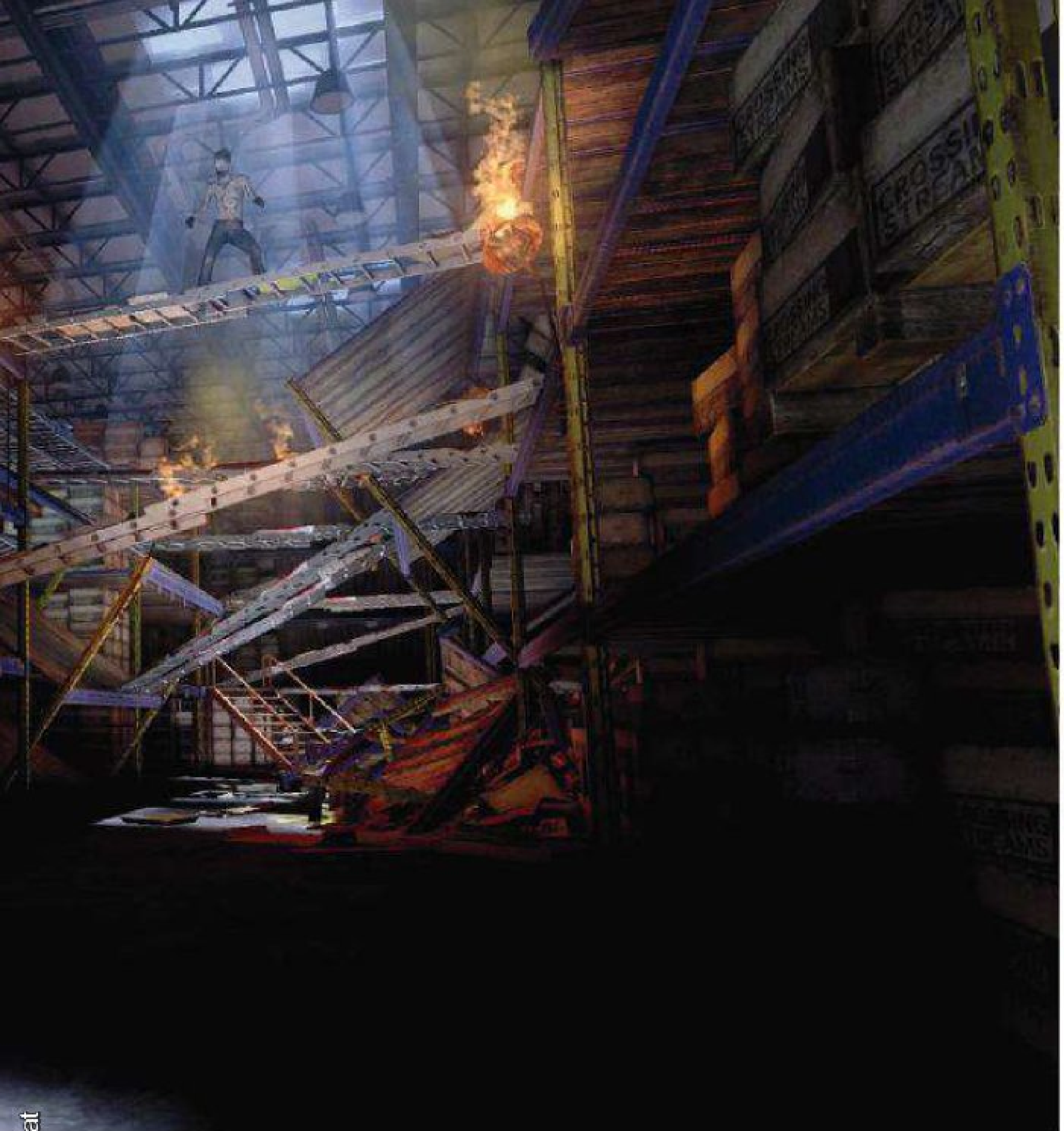
Guns have a good kick to them, but Fettel's standard psychic blast feels weak and unsatisfying. Fortunately, his powers of possession mean you can effectively re-spec the character at will

> **Foes rise up from the fog inches away from you, drop suddenly from overhead ceiling tiles, or emerge – in a faintly ridiculous fashion – from a nearby ice-cream freezer**



Shoots you, sir

Gunplay has always been *FEAR*'s somewhat incongruous addition to the paranormal thriller, and while enemies may be slower to return fire in the early stages of the third instalment, you're still actively encouraged to chuck clip after clip in their direction. Although the disproportionate attention lavished on reloading animations is somewhat at odds with the game's under-imagined enemy models, there's plenty of fun to be had with the punchy arsenal on offer. Dual-wielding machine-pistols is as satisfying as ever, while the increased emphasis on melee attacks means that softening up an advancing foe before finishing them off with a blow to the head should feel immediately natural to any veterans of the war against the Covenant.





The wisps of red smoke rising from Fettel's ghostly body make up for some rather laboured voice acting. His powers, meanwhile, erupt with some pleasantly stylish hand gestures



Possessing a soldier will make Fettel considerably more resilient than Point Man. The trick is then to keep the body alive long enough to make the most of it, not always the easiest task given *FEAR*'s way of throwing enemies at you



way of reading each level and, partnered with Point Man's much more traditional FPS skillset, should make for some creative second playthroughs as the full potential of co-op becomes apparent.

Replayability is something the team's taking seriously elsewhere, too, with campaign scoring laced throughout both singleplayer and co-op modes, and tying into a ranking system that sees you unlocking perks. *FEAR 3* hopes to make players jump just as much the second time around, too, by adding generative dynamic detailing to its set-pieces, meaning that on your subsequent trip through a familiar area you might miss the rats running past you at the first junction, only to be taken unawares by some new shock – perhaps a drinks machine angrily vomiting out cans – lurking just around the corner.

It's all adding up to an atmospheric package, and the spooky thrills are rounded out by an overarching premise that sees ghostly Alma's forthcoming childbirth heralded by earth-splitting shock waves whenever she suffers contractions. Like much of *FEAR*'s plotting, it sounds uniquely ridiculous when written down, but it plays well, offering frequent reminders of a larger narrative that's taking place just beyond the borders of the current stand-off.

With a range of locations promised – alongside Ikea, you'll also get to explore a devastated clapboard town, complete with tumbled pine trees – and some as-yet-unspecified multiplayer modes, *FEAR 3*'s looking quietly promising. If Day 1 Studios can offer two distinct singleplayer experiences that mesh well in one central campaign, this might just be the game to make you put aside the franchise's compromised previous entries and lay the ghosts of the past to rest.



Environments are solidly built and well detailed, with some excellent use of shadows. The movement of a makeshift gantry under your feet works wonders to create tension when crossing gaps







Every man-made structure in the game can be destroyed, and the underground location encourages annihilation. Volition has added variety with glacial and magma areas

Red Faction: Armageddon

The surface of Mars has been destroyed, so now it's time to work on the interior

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **VOLITION**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MAY 17**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E220**

With a subtitle like *Armageddon*, it won't come as much of a surprise that this game is about regression. Two generations after the events of *Red Faction: Guerrilla*, the human colonists have been forced to flee beneath the surface of the wrecked planet, building a new community within the sprawling mines and caverns. The trouble is, an alien race is lying dormant down in the red-tinged darkness, and it doesn't want to share.

The subterranean setting for this fourth *Red Faction* outing was, it turns out, a technical rather than narrative decision for Volition. As lead artist **Jasen Whiteside** explains: "We looked at *Guerrilla* with its open-world environments and how limiting that was in terms of visual quality and what it did to gameplay, and made the decision to go into the underground. We wanted to really close the world in so the player has a more directed experience, and so we could focus on refining the destruction, and create new weapons based on the destruction."

It's a big gamble, especially at a time when the *Call Of Duty* series seems to have wrung the very life out of linear military action. But then, there are some interesting new weapons to mess about with here. We've already seen the singularity cannon, which creates a black hole on the map, sucking in great swathes of masonry, and the magnet gun – a two-shot device that grabs chunks of scenery and ejects them across the environment toward a point of your choosing. Equally amusing, however, is the plasma gun, which sends out a thin line of pure energy that you can use to simply slice through structures, complementing the destructive potential of most of the game's arsenal with some surgical devastation.

Certainly, taking out the legs of a vast security tower and watching as the remaining supports buckle is immensely satisfying. The presence of a repair mode, allowing you to instantly fix man-made structures, allows wanton destruction without the fear of demolishing a vital escape route. But rather than simply allowing players to undo their mistakes, it also brings in a tactical component. For example, we encounter one end-of-level giant, a spider-like tank with laser-guided missiles, and to stay out of its firing line we need to keep repairing a group of metal canisters, so that we can use them as cover. Smart players will need to temper their destructive instincts with bouts of creativity.

What the development team has yet to prove, however, is that it's been able to create an engaging enough vision of life beneath the red planet's crust. Our demo reveals a familiar mass of industrial super-structures, as well as a mining complex that looks like every other piece of blue-collar sci-fi architecture built since the terraforming colony in Aliens. The alien soldiers, meanwhile, fail to offer anything new in terms of intelligence, weaponry or motives. These are just the grunts, however, and Whiteside suggests that there are more challenging foes to come, as well as some designed to service the environmental destruction: "There's one alien that goes berserk – it flies into a rage and then explodes, so you can grab him and throw him toward a group of aliens."

This time around, *Red Faction* is placing all its bets on the scenic interplay that made the franchise's name in the first place. It'll be up to gamers to decide whether they will put up with a somewhat derivative vision of the Martian underworld so long as they get to blow it all up.



Repair and contrast

The game's fourplayer co-op mode remains cloaked in secrecy but it seems that the story will differ from the singleplayer campaign, occasionally filling in gaps in the main story. Volition has hinted that each of the players will have different Nano Forge capabilities – at least one will be able to heal his teammates. Configuring the environment will be a key element, too. Gamers will need to work together to destroy and rebuild key tactical areas of each level to cope with the alien threat; they'll also need to use the repair facilities (including a neat repair grenade that can be lobbed across the environment) to create pathways for allies in trouble.



Red Faction's subterranean aliens combine elements of HR Giger and *Dead Space*. Lead character Darius Mason was tricked into releasing them – the player's role is to find out why





Conduit 2

High Voltage attempts to shock its franchise back to life

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **HIGH VOLTAGE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **APRIL 22**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E219**

If *The Conduit* set out to prove that a sci-fi shooter could be intuitive with a Wii Remote and Nunchuk, then High Voltage's sequel, almost two years in the making, should be up to the more far-reaching task of conjuring up a gameworld you actually want to visit.

The opening segment suggests the team has learned lessons from its first foray into a crowded genre and tightened many of the loose bolts that made the original such a shoddy conductor of FPS thrills. The visual improvement isn't as pronounced as we'd been led to expect, but the scenario for its opening skirmish is more tantalising than any of *The Conduit*'s dreary missions offered up. Set on an oil rig off the coast of Florida, you're thrust back into the shoes of Agent Michael Ford as he hops from portal to portal, chasing down his stereotypical nemesis and frying the goons that stand in his way. The twist is that your actions in the original game may have actually done more harm to the world than good.

The twitchy accuracy of the controls is tempered by a lock-on engaged by holding down Z, and the option to overturn tables for cover relieves the sitting-duck syndrome that mired much of the first game's level design. Grenades – thrown with a lash of the Nunchuk – are still a gamble, regularly devolving into an escape from your own blast radius while not bothering enemies that remain more A than I. The weapons are a mixed bag, too, the immediate, satisfying rattle of a machine-gun in stark contrast with the slow charge and irritating path-finding of the Deatomiser's deadly, lassoing pulse.

The most encouraging trick we've seen emerge from *Conduit 2*'s sleeve so far comes midway through its opening stage, where an attack on the rig by a writhing, enraged Leviathan shakes up the tempo and adds some fiery colour to the cold, metallic tones that characterise the setting. It shows that the design team has acknowledged the banality of the environments that hampered *The Conduit*. Hopefully it's a type of liveliness that's built upon as the game progresses.

Though *Conduit 2*'s opening action suggests a slicker ride than last time, there are still whiffs of mistakes past. Cutscenes and voiceovers are sub-par and lifeless, punctuating a hero's journey that's difficult to care about or even laugh along with. Scanning rooms with the ASE device is still a pace-breaking chore, and the often disorienting room layouts do little to keep the action flowing. It's an improvement on *The Conduit*'s design, but it's still capable of sapping enthusiasm.

The Conduit was a mediocre stab at filling a gaping Wii niche that didn't have a fixed bar. Problematically for High Voltage, standards have since been set by Ubisoft's second attempt, *Red Steel 2*, and Activision's first real commitment, *GoldenEye*. To compete, *Conduit 2* needs to demonstrate some more original thinking and channel some higher-octane thrills.



The initial stage is populated almost entirely by hazmat-wearing foes, a welcome change from the brainless *Turok 2* rejects that bungled their way through *The Conduit*





Headshots deliver a cringe-inducing crunch. Meanwhile, the ability to interact with the environment, toppling tables for cover, moves away from the sense that the original game took place on a low-budget film set



The showdown at the end of the first stage is a sizeable one, even if it plays out like a beginner's guide to boss battles, giving you generous time to get to gun turrets



Easy does it

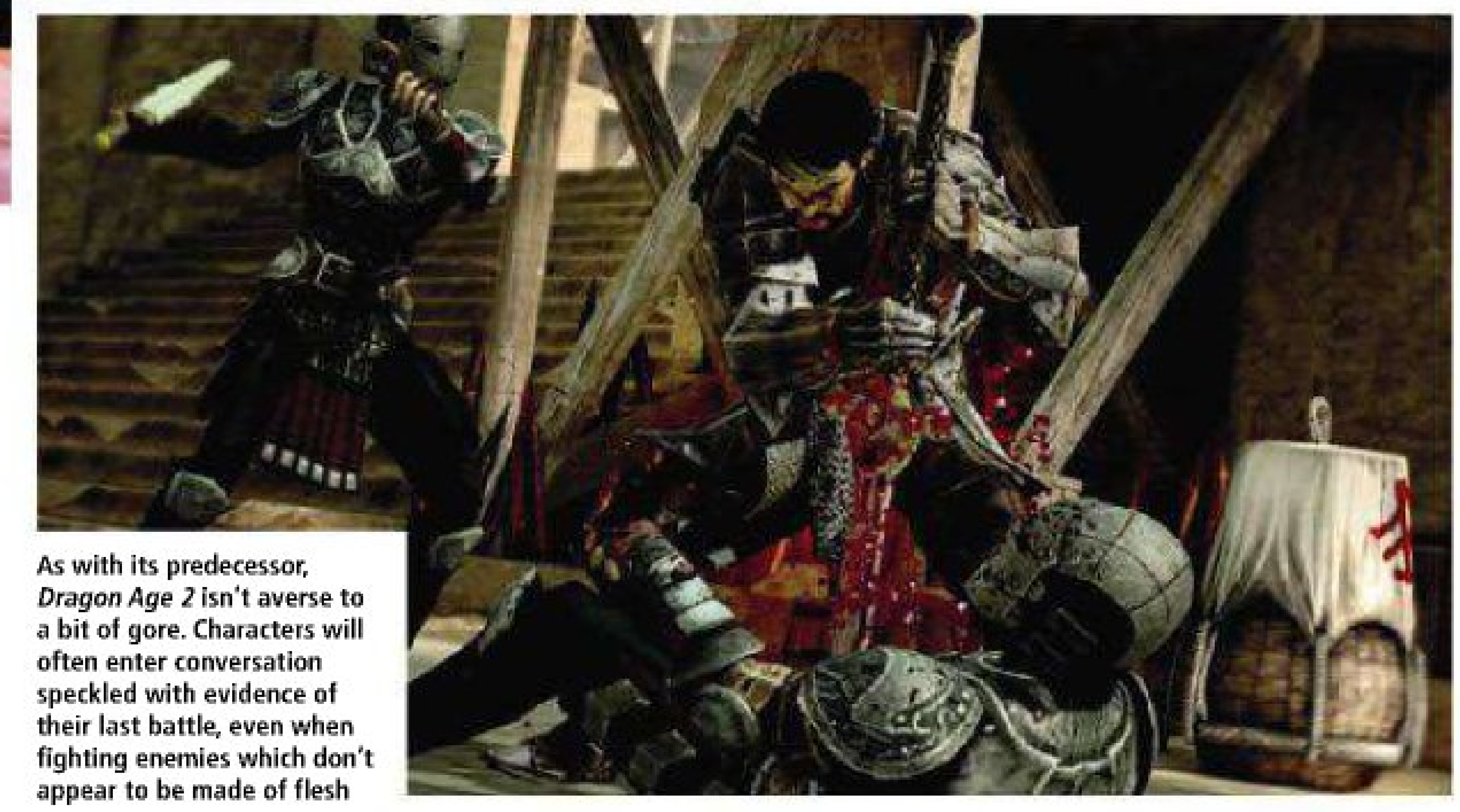
The soft learning curve was one of the saving graces of *The Conduit*, and the sequel follows in its baby steps. Death – whether by your own fumbled grenade or the infrequently lucky AI – will reset you to a generous checkpoint. The strength of your weapons and the level of your health are also vastly inconsistent with those of the opposition, who can be dropped by the slightest melee or far away buckshot. They never pose a real threat if you know how to walk backwards and recover for a few seconds, and even the climactic battle with the enormous Leviathan, in which you use turrets to pinpoint weak spots, is a measly challenge by the lowest of standards.







The Deep Roads – the extensive underground network of abandoned tunnels explored during the first game – will feature, though *Dragon Age 2* is set in the Free Marshes, a landmass distinct from the first game's Ferelden home



As with its predecessor, *Dragon Age 2* isn't averse to a bit of gore. Characters will often enter conversation speckled with evidence of their last battle, even when fighting enemies which don't appear to be made of flesh

Dragon Age 2

Exploring BioWare's latest grand adventure with Hawke the slayer

FORMATS: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **MARCH**



Why are people so attached to their version of *Mass Effect*'s Commander Shepard? She (or he) is a more defined character than in many RPGs, and certainly nowhere near as flexible a protagonist as *Dragon Age: Origins*' Gray Warden. Yet Shepard evokes stronger feelings in the hearts of players than *Origins*' star could ever hope to, something BioWare no doubt had in mind – rather than any desire for 'simplification' – when designing *Dragon Age 2*'s Hawke. This play session, our last before the game's launch, is our first significant chunk of time playing as the female version of *Dragon Age 2*'s star – and we decide it's also an excellent opportunity to try out some deeds on the darker end of the BioWare moral spectrum, too

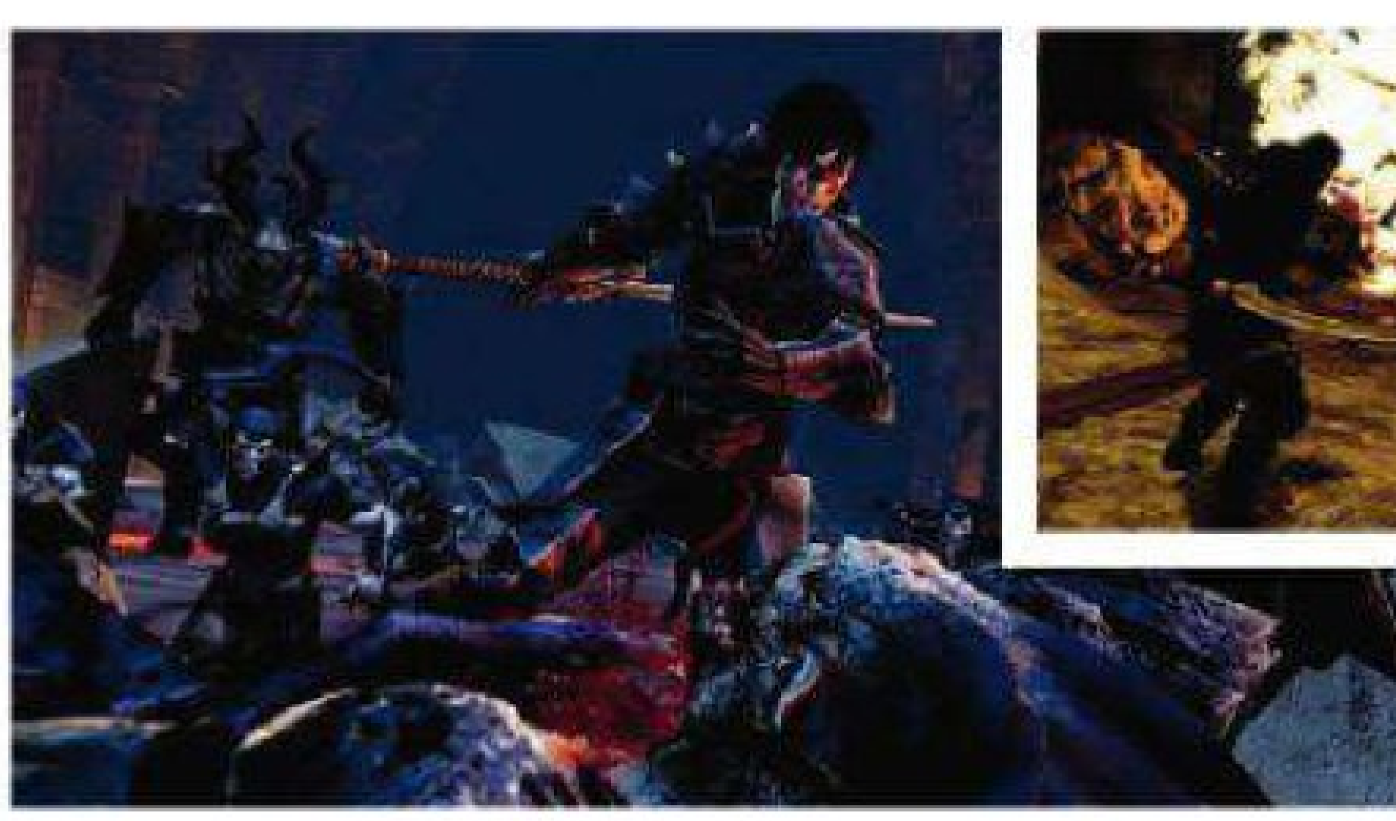
In truth, there's little scope for out-and-out evil doings in our demo, with most of the choices we make defining Hawke's attitude and reaction as events unfold. It works as well here as in BioWare's space opera, casting you as the director of an independent performance rather than puppet-master of an expressionless mannequin (though, we must admit, we have some reservations about the well-spoken but slightly wooden Ms Hawke). "We have a much more defined role of how the character fits into the world," says **Fernando Melo**, online producer on *Dragon Age 2*. "The fact that they're human is very important to the story and where it's going. I think you actually don't lose as much from it in the sense of the choices that you get to make as a player." *Dragon Age* might have borrowed *Mass Effect*'s conversation wheel, but it's improved it too – the icon in the centre of the wheel, which illustrates your prospective conversation choice, complements the brief text précis by providing an inkling of the sentiment behind it. What you might expect to be 'evil' options are often merely framed as aggressive – with an icon of crossed swords illustrating the option to issue a call to arms.

Our demo sees our party tomb robbing, on an expedition organised by the brother of Dwarven party member Varric (who also, due to a framing device set after the events of *Dragon Age 2*, essentially narrates much of the game). As we journey farther, a not entirely unpredictable betrayal sees us trapped deep in the ruins, fighting off a horde of demonic foes – at which point things get morally ambiguous. A relatively benign demon offers us the chance of escape – in return for killing one of his rivals. We play this encounter in a number of ways, refusing point blank and killing the monster (a decision framed as self-righteous rather than belligerent), doing as he asks, and then, finally, doing as he asks and killing him anyway. As in the first game, a traditional good/evil meter is absent. Instead, your moral worth is reflected by party members, whose individual 'approval' ratings alter with your own behaviour. It's a less clear-cut system than the usual sliding scale – Aveline, a noble enough seeming knight, approves when we mercilessly refuse to parley.

BioWare's redesign of *Dragon Age*'s mechanics – specifically its handling of the player character – might have been drastic, but as a tool for engaging players with a narrative, *Mass Effect* has shown this approach to work. *Dragon Age*'s world, for all its familiarity, was richly, comprehensively detailed. And, in Hawke, players may find a stronger connection to it.

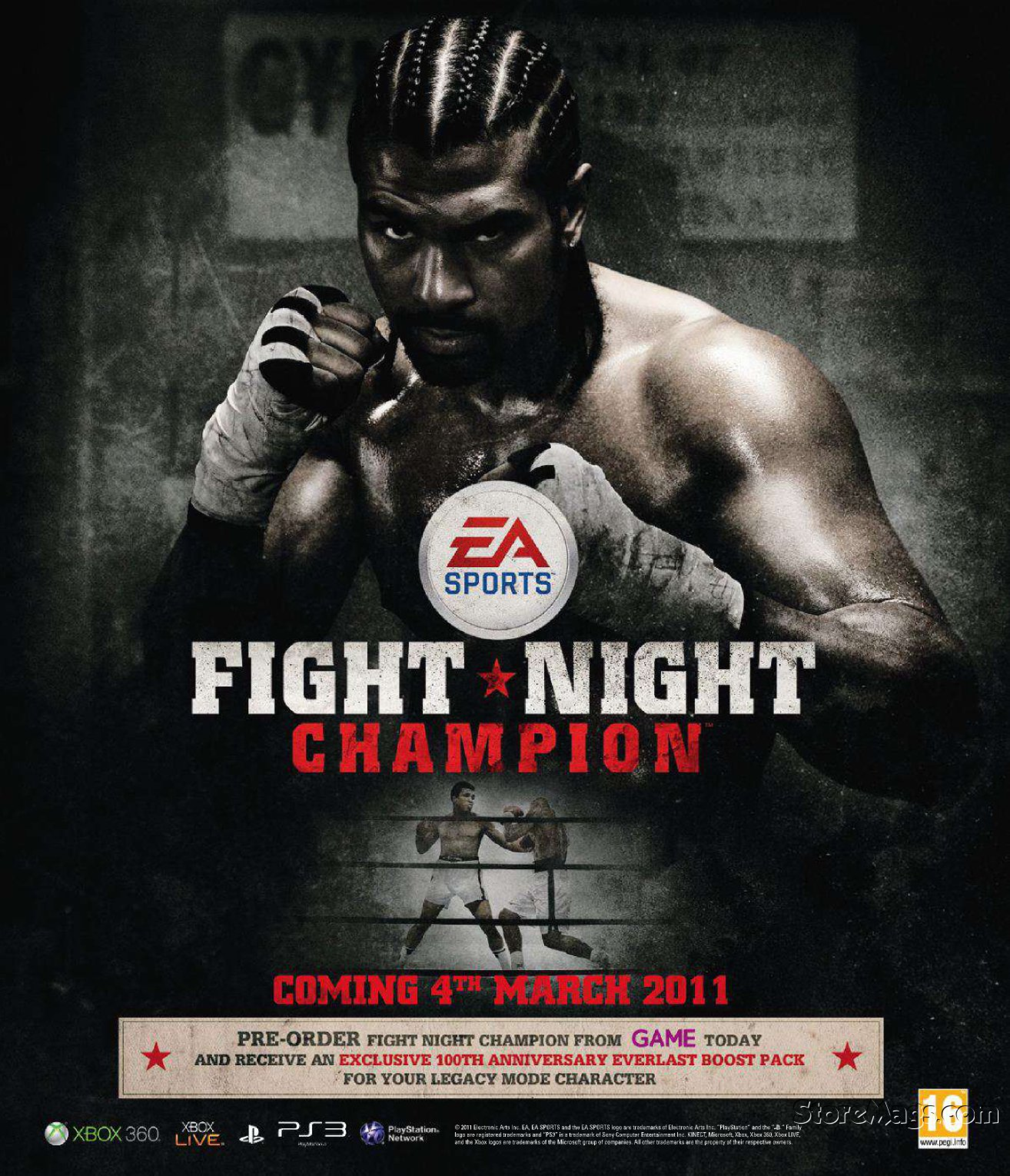
Parallel worlds

Viewing the PC and console versions of *Dragon Age 2* side by side underscores the differences. The PC version's pulled-back default view seems to favour more tactical, whole-party play, though players who wish to pause the action and plot attacks carefully will be able to do so on console as well. "With *Origins*, the game was built on PC for six years and the last year we ported it over to console," esplains Melo. "It suffered a little bit from that. It was also outsourced. This time, the key difference is that it's in-house, it's all built at the same time, so now we have people that are dedicated to each plaform for things like GUI, controls, and combat balancing."





The previous game's character classes – rogue, mage and warrior – return. As with *Origins*, there will be scope to alter your character's abilities and specialisations as they grow



EA SPORTS
FIGHT NIGHT
CHAMPION
COMING 4TH MARCH 2011
PRE-ORDER FIGHT NIGHT CHAMPION FROM GAME TODAY
AND RECEIVE AN EXCLUSIVE 100TH ANNIVERSARY EVERLAST BOOST PACK
FOR YOUR LEGACY MODE CHARACTER
XBOX 360
XBOX LIVE
PS3
PlayStation Network
© 2011 Electronic Arts Inc. EA, EA SPORTS and the EA SPORTS logo are trademarks of Electronic Arts Inc. "PlayStation" and the "PS" Family logo are registered trademarks and "PS3" is a trademark of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. KINECT, Microsoft, Xbox, Xbox 360, Xbox LIVE, and the Xbox logos are trademarks of the Microsoft group of companies. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.
16
www.pegi.info
StoreMags.com





If you get tired of looking at the finely rendered bodywork, the new helmet cam gives an interior view and makes a crash feel that bit more bone crunching

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ELECTRONIC ARTS**
DEVELOPER: **SLIGHTLY MAD STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MARCH 24 (EU), MARCH 25 (UK), MARCH 29 (US)**

Shift 2: Unleashed

It drops the franchise branding, but Slightly Mad's sim sequel has kept its newfound networked core

Here's a tricky one: when is a *Need For Speed* game not a *Need For Speed* game? When it's simulation racer lumbered with the task of following the previous year's arcade hit, apparently. The name of EA's all-encompassing driving brand seems to hover awkwardly around *Shift 2* – floating ambiguously near the base of the box art, for instance, or briefly fading in and out of view during trailers. *Need For Speed* is no longer in the title at all, is it? "It's not, no," says **Jesse Abney**, producer on the *Need For Speed* series. "This was really an opportunity for us to set *Shift* as a series aside. *Need For Speed*, traditionally, at least in modern years, has come to represent arcade action racing. We really wanted *Shift 2* to be an authentic racing experience."

We wonder if the slightly uncertain level of *Need For Speed* branding was out of a concern that owners of Criterion's *Hot Pursuit* would dismiss *Shift 2* as another, similar game, but Abney suggests that the problem was more deeply rooted in the brand: "When [people] picked up on *Need For Speed* in the title, [they asked], 'Is there a story?' and, 'Where's Maggie Q?' So we needed to divorce ourselves from that preconception of a *Need For Speed* game".

Sitting down with the game, it's easy to see why EA is so anxious to ensure that consumers understand that this is a very different proposition to *Hot Pursuit*. Abney: "We're keying into race drivers' experience: the skill, the expertise, the stress and the strain of being in those high-intensity moments of interaction – as well as the physical effects of managing those high-performance machines on tracks within that environment." The major way that this sense of being the driver – as opposed to merely controlling the car – manifests itself is in the new helmet cam, which changes angle as your driver looks into oncoming angles and bends. It's an intriguing addition, bringing a human-seeming element to an occasionally sterile genre – but we wonder how easy it'll be to tear simulation experts away from their beloved bumper cam. "It's a good point," says Abney. "For many simulation fans, bumper cam becomes their immediate performance-driving cam. But when we put a race driver who knows how to play a racing game in the helmet cam, they never leave. It's such a natural inclination."

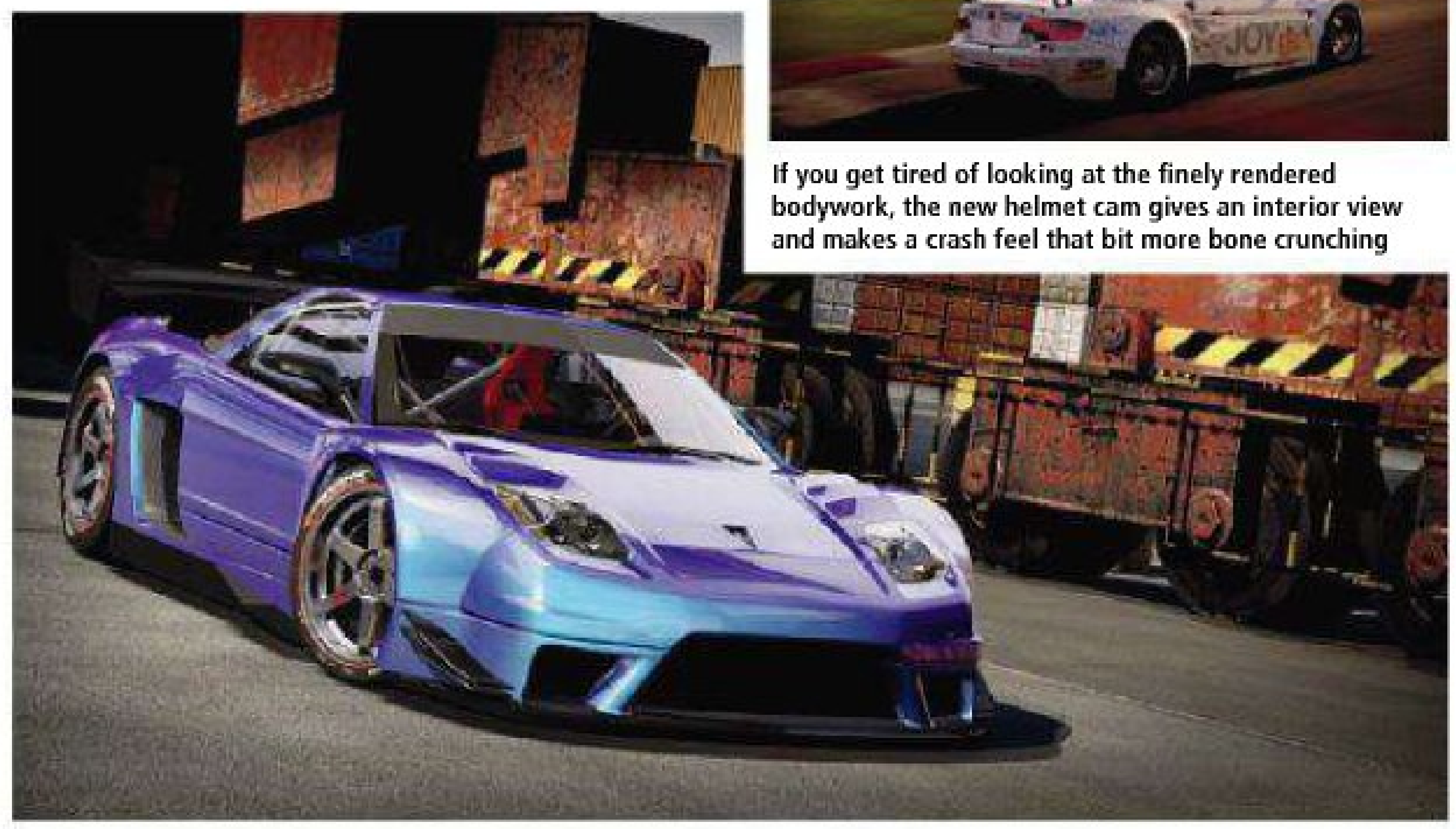
But even if *Shift 2 Unleashed* is holding its *Need For Speed* branding at arm's length, in one crucial respect it's a major part of the franchise. Autolog – the constantly monitoring and updating hub-cum-leaderboard which fired the competitive instinct around which *Hot Pursuit* was designed – will be returning, and according to Abney, the simulation aspects of *Shift 2* will only enhance its appeal. "We see Autolog as *Need For Speed* DNA now. It will exist across the entire franchise. It's a very simple idea with very basic mechanics, which can be tailored to suit to each design. The implementation in *Hot Pursuit* is very straightforward, whereas in a game like *Shift 2* it's very stats-driven." In other words, it won't just tell you that your time's been bested by a friend, it'll describe in minute detail how they tweaked their car to do it.

Whatever you call it, *Shift 2: Unleashed* is offering a take on racing distinct from most driving simulators – one with the driver at its heart, and one that should have no problem sitting alongside *Hot Pursuit* in a racing fan's collection.



Trading paint

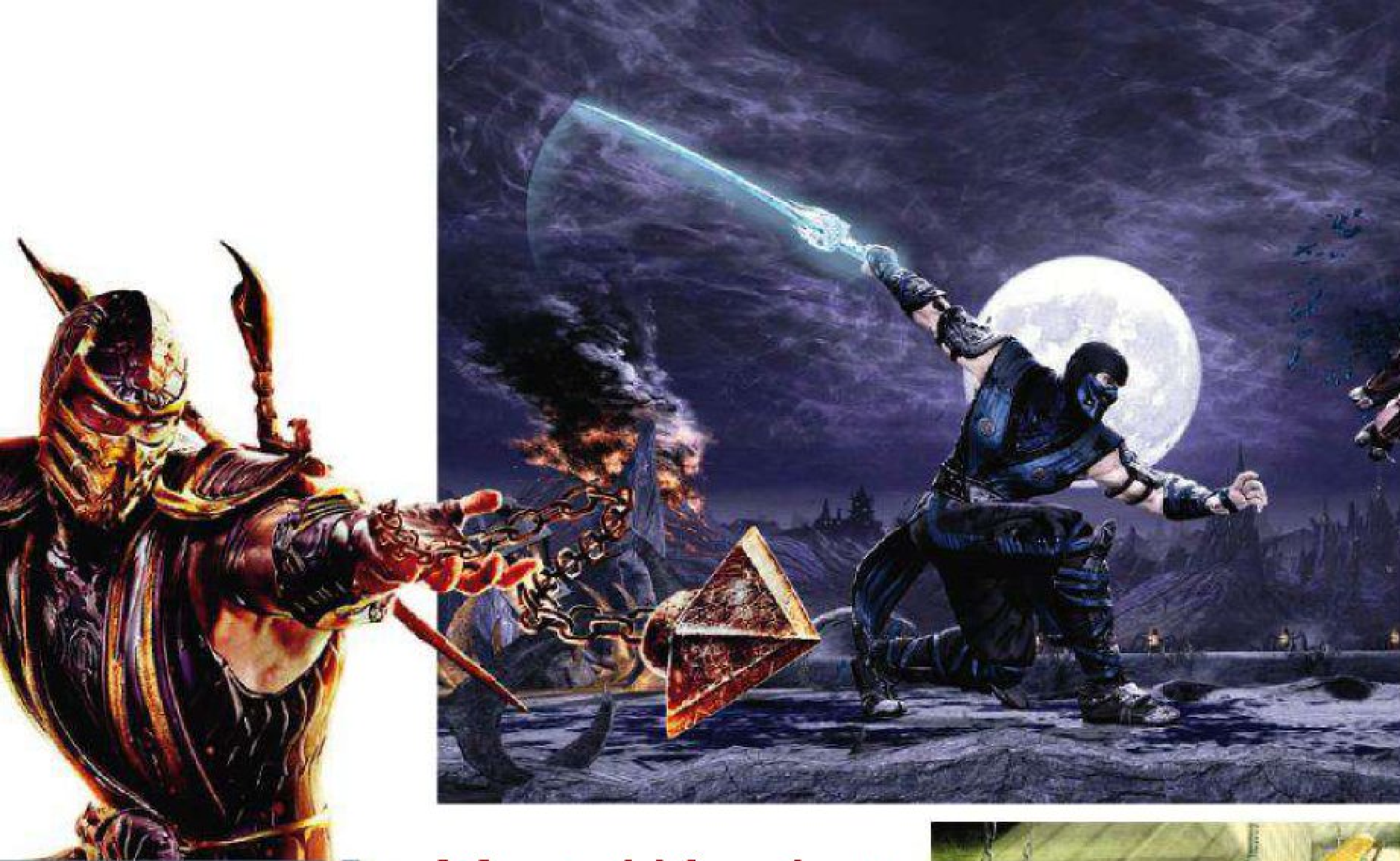
***Shift 2* is an excellent-looking game – in both technical and stylistic terms. There's something about the colour scheme and slight stylisation that, despite the absence of police sirens and spike strips, is identifiably *Need For Speed*. "We call it our unique visual signature," explains Abney. "It's part of our VFX pass. We want people to know it's *Need For Speed* from across the room. [*Need For Speed*] uses a unique colour pattern space – the way we treat all of the elements of colour is very deliberate. And the speed blur, which I know a lot of simulation enthusiasts don't like – I think one of the first mods removed speed blur – is an element of our visual design."**







The game features 145 cars from 36 makers and 35 different tracks. A new night-driving mode will make returning tracks a little less familiar. Our attempt to race on a track without scoping it out in daylight first ended in abject failure





The arena may have a 2D plane, but the art assets embrace three dimensions, and there's a pleasantly trashy imagination at work everywhere. Classic arenas return alongside favourite characters

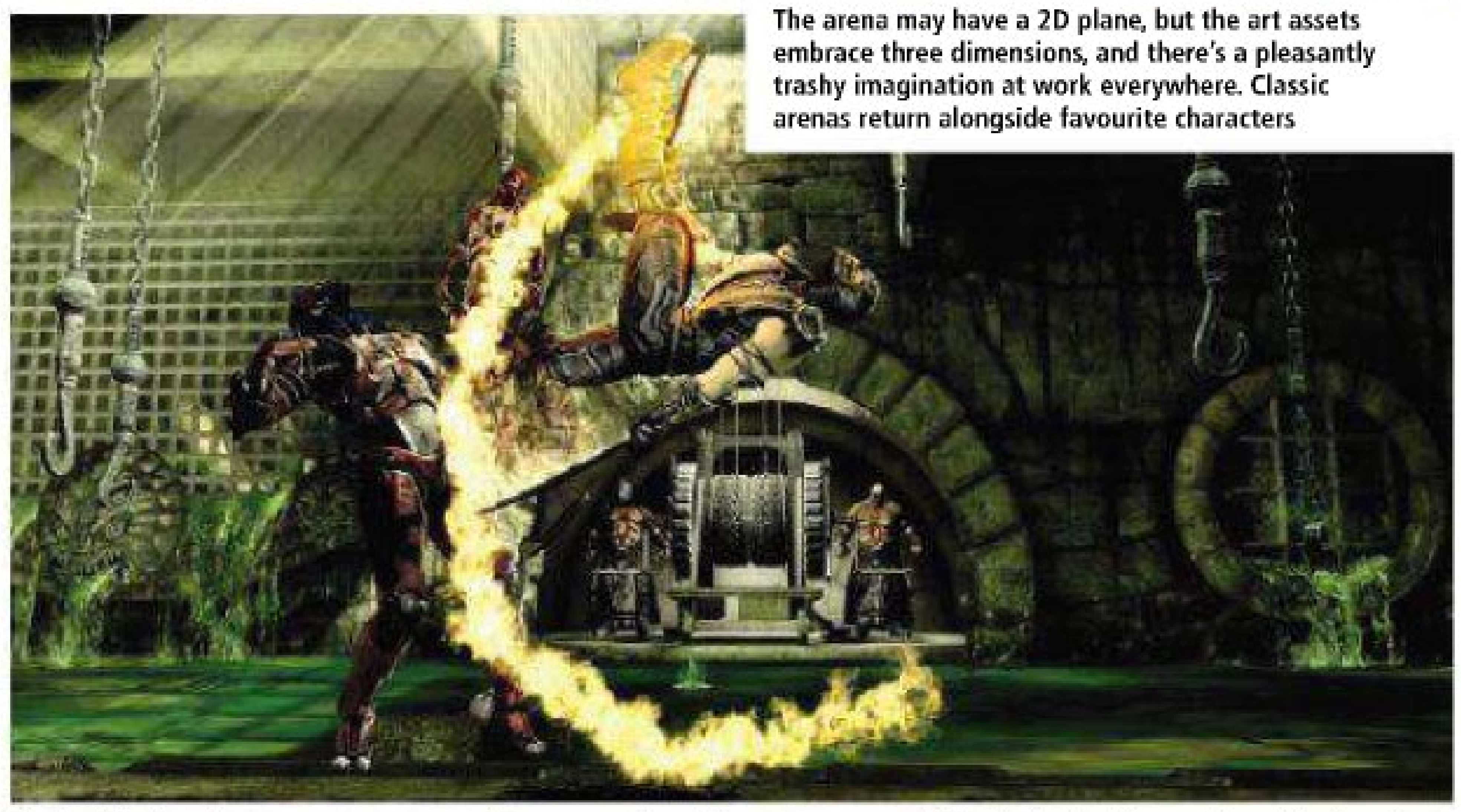
Mortal Kombat

Heads still roll, but has the carnival of blood grown more technical?

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **WARNER BROS**
DEVELOPER: **NETHERREALM STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **APRIL**

If you wanted a point of origin from which to chart the myriad differences, both large and small, between the *Mortal Kombat* and *Street Fighter* series, you could do worse than begin with this question: which do you think was demoed at 2010's E3 inside a papier-mâché crypt? Visceral rather than technical, and roundly snubbed by the likes of tournament organisers and arcade purists, Ed Boon's schlocky brawler has always managed to revel in its exploitation excesses, and to yank awestruck casuals into its orbit through direct – or perhaps basic – controls and crunching combos. A recent preview session revealed that, as far as its latest outing is concerned, none of that has changed.

The game has, however, become at least a little more tactical in its old age, with the return to a 2D fighting plane making room for the addition of a brand-new Super Meter. Formed of three sections, all of which are charged by taking damage, players can cash in one segment for a Super Move, use two in exchange for a Breaker to get out of nasty hammerings, or wait to fill all three in order to fire up the new over-powered X-Ray attack, which can chew through up to 40 per cent of an enemy's health with one punch. It's a straightforward mechanic, but one that encourages risk taking and a gentle form of strategising, and it's coupled with a combo redesign that simplifies inputs in order to shift the focus, instead, towards threading set-piece moves together into chains.



Much effort has been spent on the game's new procedural damage system, which shreds clothing and slowly buries the character models under gouts of blood and ugly bruises. The dev team also claims a combo-friendly framerate of 60fps

Beyond that, however, this is pure back-to-basics reboot. Fatalities return in a more cheerfully gratuitous form than ever before, while the 2D fighting ensures there's a familiar emphasis on projectile play, and those X-Ray attacks send the camera swooping inside the victim's body to show veins rupturing, organs squealing and bones splintering, as if the writing team from House MD had decided to turn their collective attention to the UFC. Elsewhere, a fan-favourite character roster is smartly delivered with an art style that eschews the classy watercolours of *SFIV* for a shiny, posable action-figure approach, and a new tag team mode enables four players to duck in and out of the brawling in bigger matches, and deliver brutal assists from the sidelines.

The end result may still be a game that's more suited for the lobby of a Pizza Hut than the smoky, reverent darkness of an old arcade, then, but there are plenty of signs that *Mortal Kombat* has grown increasingly comfortable with its image. If you don't like videogames, this will offer absolutely everything that you probably expect from them. If you do, then it should prove chummily familiar: a blunt and grotesque throwback that time has rendered entirely endearing.



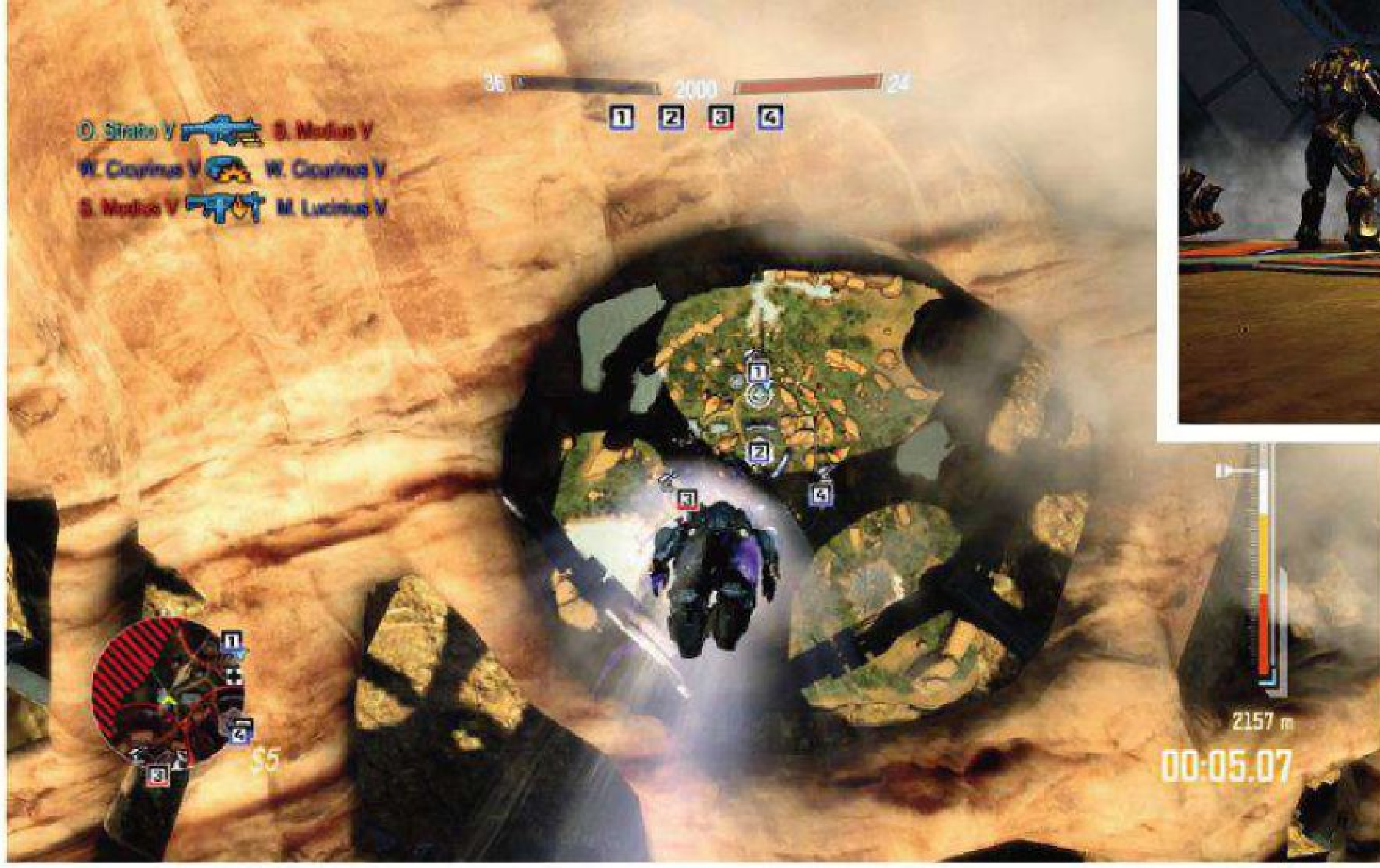


Each character comes with his or her own animations for even the simplest moves. It might be easy to laugh at, but *Mortal Kombat* fights have a real sense of heft



Killing joke

After the licence constrictions applied by DC Comics with the last game, *Mortal Kombat* sees NetherRealm returning to fatalities with a powerful HD bloodlust, offering at least two different finishers for each character, and more in cases where nasty ideas presented themselves in abundance. It's a pantomime, but it still has the power to surprise, as anyone who's seen Mileena rip the top of Johnny Cage's head off and chew on the exposed jawbone will be able to attest. Fans of stylised head trauma may also enjoy the new contextual fatalities, one of which allows Sonya Blade to pulp a rival's brains against the side of a subway train.





Jetpack/jump is mapped to either bumper, a physical inconvenience as sprint is activated with a press of the left thumbstick. Performing an overdrive charge sends you into thirdperson: it's a striking animation that separates you momentarily from your vessel, enhancing the sense of speed and showing off the character models



Section 8: Prejudice

TimeGate hits the ground charging with its FPS sequel, but will it survive the gauntlet?

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **TIMEGATE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MARCH**

A downloadable game birthed from a 2009 boxed release might signal a quick-cash spinoff or supplementary DLC in disguise, but as our hands-on time with the follow-up to *Section 8* begins we're assured by TimeGate's president, **Adel Chaveleh**, that this is "a full-blown sequel in every way".

It's hard to disagree when the campaign mode hits its stride. After a few quick tutorials on overdrive sprinting – which sends your tin man charging forth in thirdperson – and jetpack boosting, an attack on Section 8's HQ plunges you into the thick of it. An auto-aim that replenishes after use relieves the stress of sticky situations and blasting away the onslaught of robotic villains feels like a quick, accessible hit of arcade action. Enemies fall much more easily than they did in *Section 8*, but it still requires a level of strategy to gain the upper hand in the open expanses and a shrewd approach to your weapon loadout. Unlike the first *Section 8*, *Prejudice* now has a rigid unlock structure, metering out content to avoid overwhelming users with a gamut of initial features. Over 50 unlocks are promised (from vehicles to advanced weapons) for the final build, achieved through various in-game avenues including dynamic side-missions that pop up as multiplayer matches spread across the maps. The ability to call in vehicle and resource drops adds another layer of strategy, but doesn't over-complicate matters with tricky interfaces. The crisp, clean HUD remains comprehensive and uncluttered, bringing to mind Massive Entertainment's 2000 strategy game *Ground Control* in its style and ease of use.

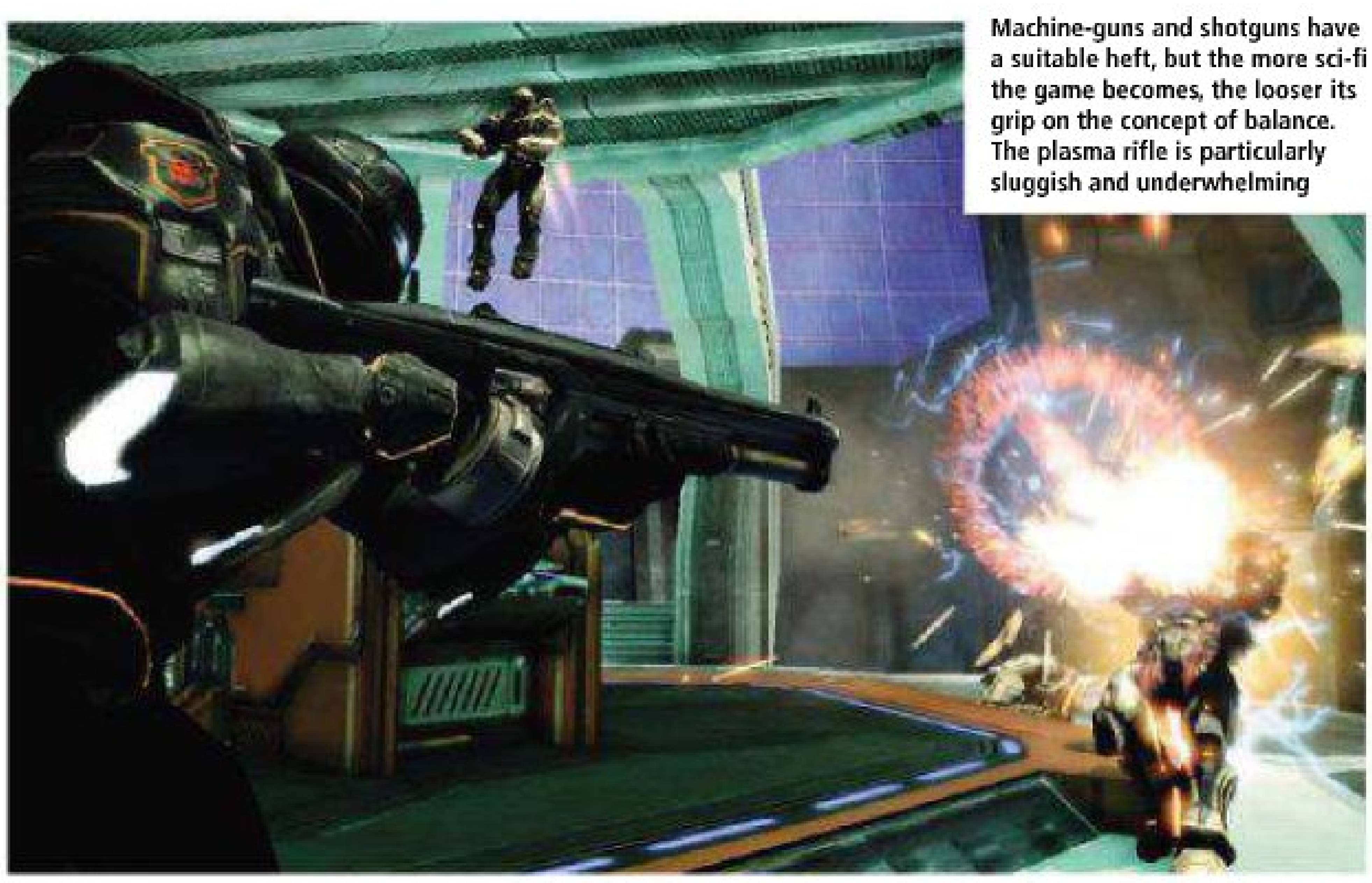
The immediacy of *Prejudice* is no accident – Chaveleh's team has actively pursued a more 'accessible' model for its franchise and done so with active community feedback. Another ace up TimeGate's sleeve is its price of 1,200 MS points, which could see it find favour among the cost-conscious and is likely intended to tempt users away from other virtual commitments.

One issue TimeGate may be overlooking as it strives to broaden its playerbase, however, is its artistic content, which has an unremarkable vibe. Making *Section 8* more accessible is an impotent strategy if the mythology of the gameworld isn't captivating or inviting in the first place. It may be prettier this time, and better balanced, but it's still a bunch of armour-clad soldiers duking it out in environments similar to those of every other sci-fi FPS you've played.

It's likely that *Prejudice*'s longevity will lie in its 32-man multiplayer, but now that many of the series' quirks have been put to better use by more inviting shooters, the war may be over before this next battle even begins.



All multiplayer game modes are playable offline, including Swarm, a tower-defence setup that mimics *Gears Of War*'s Horde mode and doesn't go easy on you, with wave after wave of killer robot assassins



Machine-guns and shotguns have a suitable heft, but the more sci-fi the game becomes, the looser its grip on the concept of balance. The plasma rifle is particularly sluggish and underwhelming



The drop-in

Making a welcome return are the skydiving spawn-ins of the original. Having picked your destination in the loadout menu, you're shot from altitude towards the map headfirst. The sense of velocity is immense and the impact on landing is weighty but not lingered over – once you hit the deck, it's time to get moving. Turrets can still target you in your freefall, so it's vital you choose your drop-in point wisely or risk hitting the deck like a sack of armour-clad meat. The ebb and flow of matches forces you to coordinate drop-ins, liaising with teammates as you go.



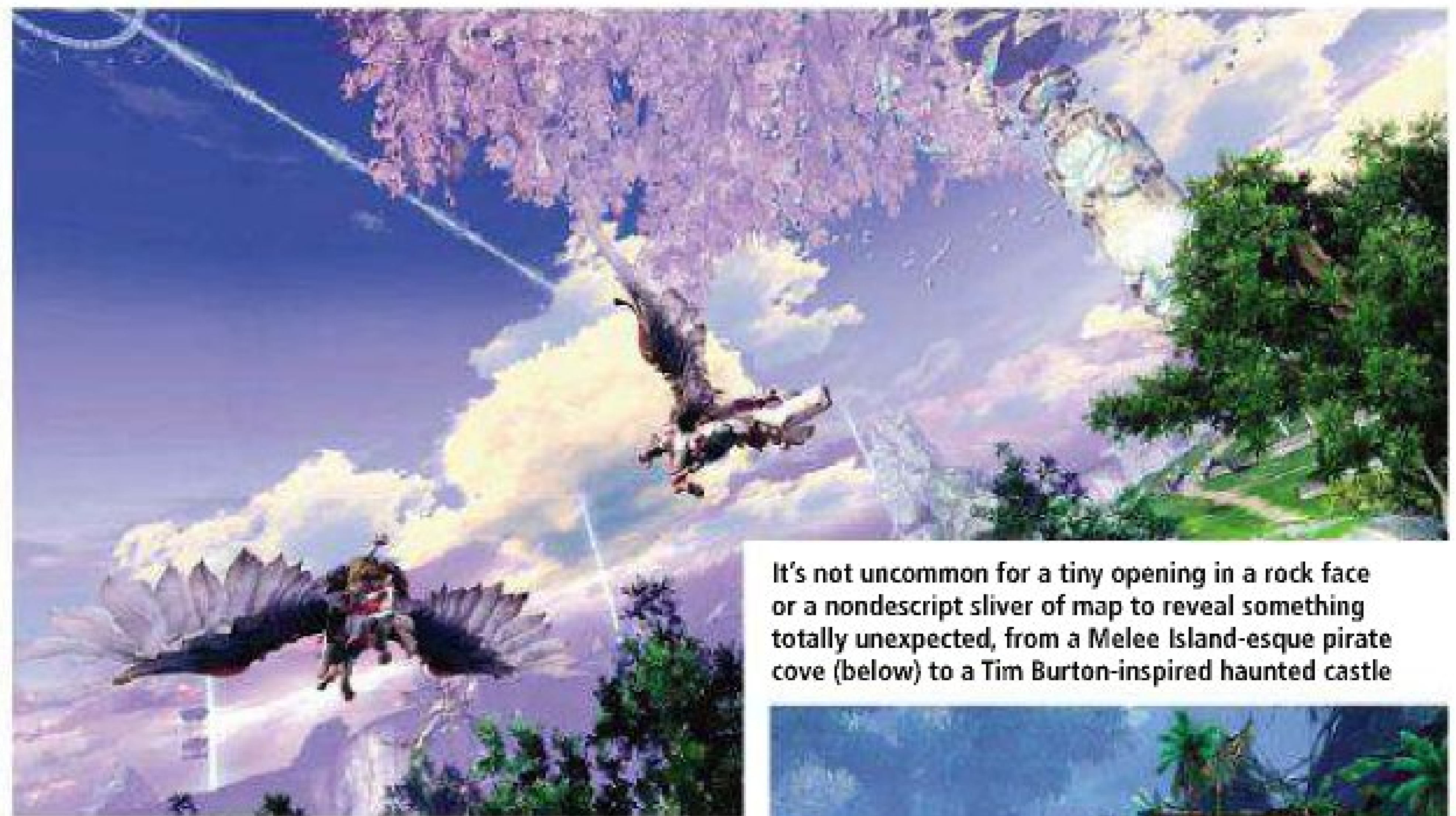
3
www.pegi.info
Nintendo
StoreMags.com
Kirby's Epic Yarn
SPIN BOARDER
SUBMARINE
SAUCER
TANKBOT
OUT 25th February
OFF-ROADER
UNIQUE PLATFORM ACTION
Kirby's Epic Yarn blends traditional platform game elements, innovative play mechanics and a jaw-dropping patchwork playground.
PULL THE STRINGS
Ripping off patches, pulling loose threads or opening zippers are just some examples of how you can play with your surroundings to clear paths and unveil exciting secrets!
CHALLENGES GALORE!
Test your skills and try to complete up to 100 timed challenges in five different categories.
Seamless fun in all shapes and forms!
Lead Kirby in an all-new adventure for Wii and discover the power of yarn! The entire adventure can be enjoyed by one or two players as you transform into amazing new forms of all shapes and sizes and explore a world where there's always something to uncover behind the seams!
Wii
Kirby's Epic Yarn
GamesMaster 80%
NGamer 87%
Nintendo 92%
IGN 90%
Wii
www.nintendo.co.uk/kirby











It's not uncommon for a tiny opening in a rock face or a nondescript sliver of map to reveal something totally unexpected, from a Melee Island-esque pirate cove (below) to a Tim Burton-inspired haunted castle



TERA

A pirate MMOG of a different kind, is this the crossover hit Korea's been waiting for?

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **FROGSTER**
DEVELOPER: **BLUEHOLE STUDIO**
ORIGIN: **SOUTH KOREA**
RELEASE: **2011**



The last guardian

Much of what happens as you quest through mobs – very little grinding is required here – is prelude to the real chess game in *TERA*: the boss battle. The pride of the game's bestiary, these titans bring out in bold relief the strengths and weaknesses of the classes. Able to annihilate a party with a single strike and particularly tetchy when low on health, they ruthlessly separate the combo-mashers from the more calculated blockers, dealers and healers. The four dealer classes – Slayer, Berserker, Archer and Sorcerer – should find their own fans for aesthetic and tactical reasons, Slayer having the flashy combos expected to sell *TERA* to casual passers-by.

TERA, of all games, should know that it's not the first MMOG to make daring use of Unreal technology. It is, after all, more than just a spiritual successor to *Lineage II*, a pioneering Unreal Engine 2 game. And if you want that point explained further, you're probably best talking to NCsoft's lawyers.

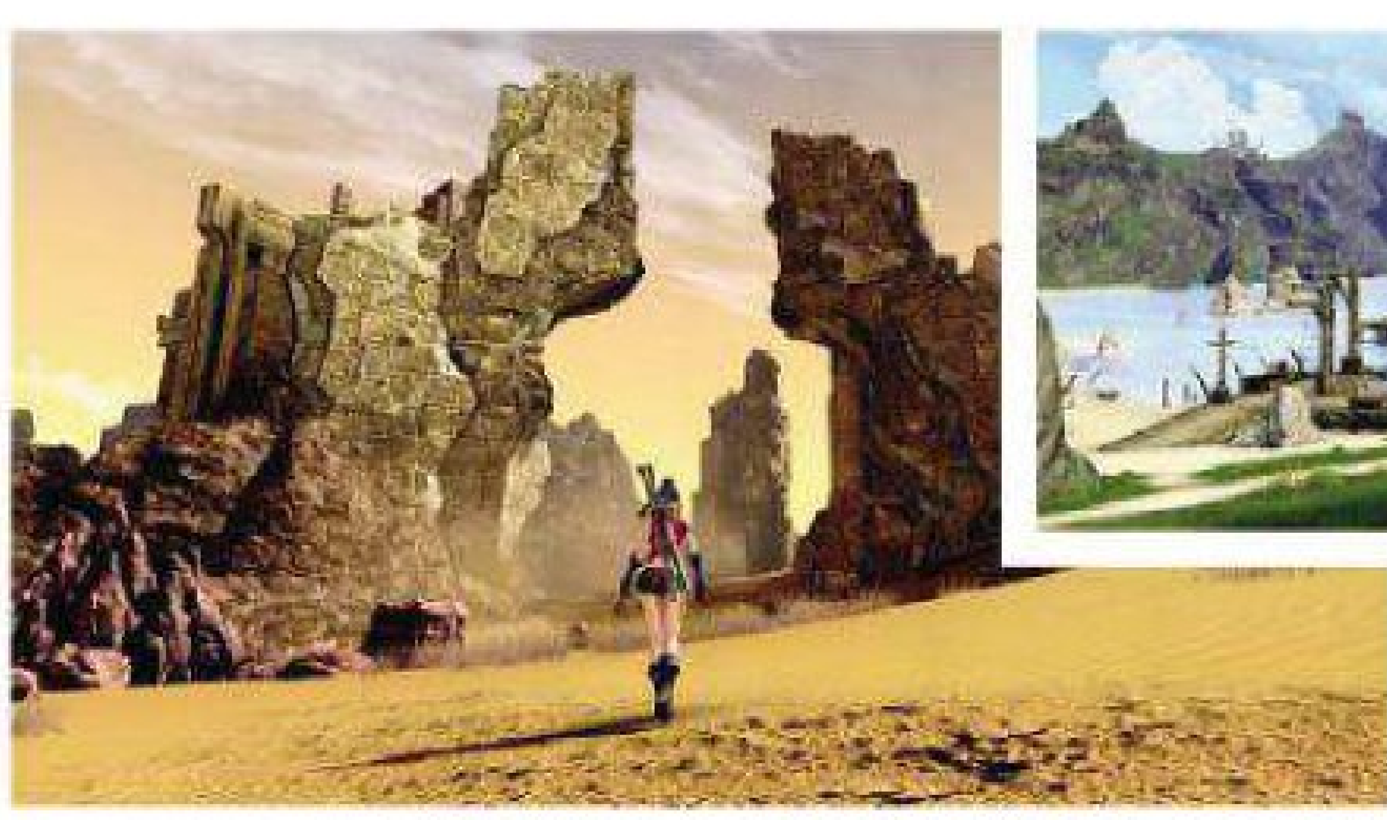
It was just over a year ago that four key members of Bluehole Studio (of seven defendants in total) were found guilty of stealing source code from their former project, *Lineage III*. The price of this treachery was an astonishing two million won (over £1m) and a one-and-a-half-year prison sentence for producer Yong-Hyun Park. Many feared the death penalty for the spoils, a project known as S1, but instead it became *The Exiled Realm Of Arborea*. In the absence of a 'real' *Lineage III*, this is pretty much it.

Really, an MMOG with such a troubled technical past has no right to be the finest-looking UE3 game since *Mirror's Edge*, but here we are. Character design aside – while the creatures are terrific, the quality seems to plummet the moment breasts come into the equation – *TERA* is dazzling. Though it features successful controller support, it's one of very few Unreal-powered games to be entirely PC-exclusive. As such, there isn't an engine feature, old or new, that isn't lavished on its environments, which cover every terrain and weather type imaginable – and consistently, thanks to novel tweaking of Epic's phong shader, look like concept art.

Of those lining up to praise these looks, the most important are the defiant MMOG-haters deciding that this, finally, is the one to give a go. Joining the likes of Nexon's *Vindictus*, Hangame's *Continent Of The Ninth* and NCsoft's own *Blade & Soul*, *TERA* is part of a new generation of Korean MMOGs threatening to dramatically leapfrog today's console-led production values. Its audience, then, includes a vast nation of graphics whores wondering if the drought would ever end.

Will they hate this MMOG, too? It's hard to predict. *TERA* has two very strong things going for it, the first being an 'action MMOG' stance that actually rings true. Pitched as an MMOG in which the most important action is in the centre of the screen, not the UI around it, its combat features no lock-on and requires strafing, dodging and relatively precise strikes. Its tank classes are something of a new proposition, more active than the name implies and more dynamic within a group. Its use of physics, meanwhile, means that when your pin-up pixie drops a sword bigger than she is on a panther's head, the beast crashes to the ground convincingly.

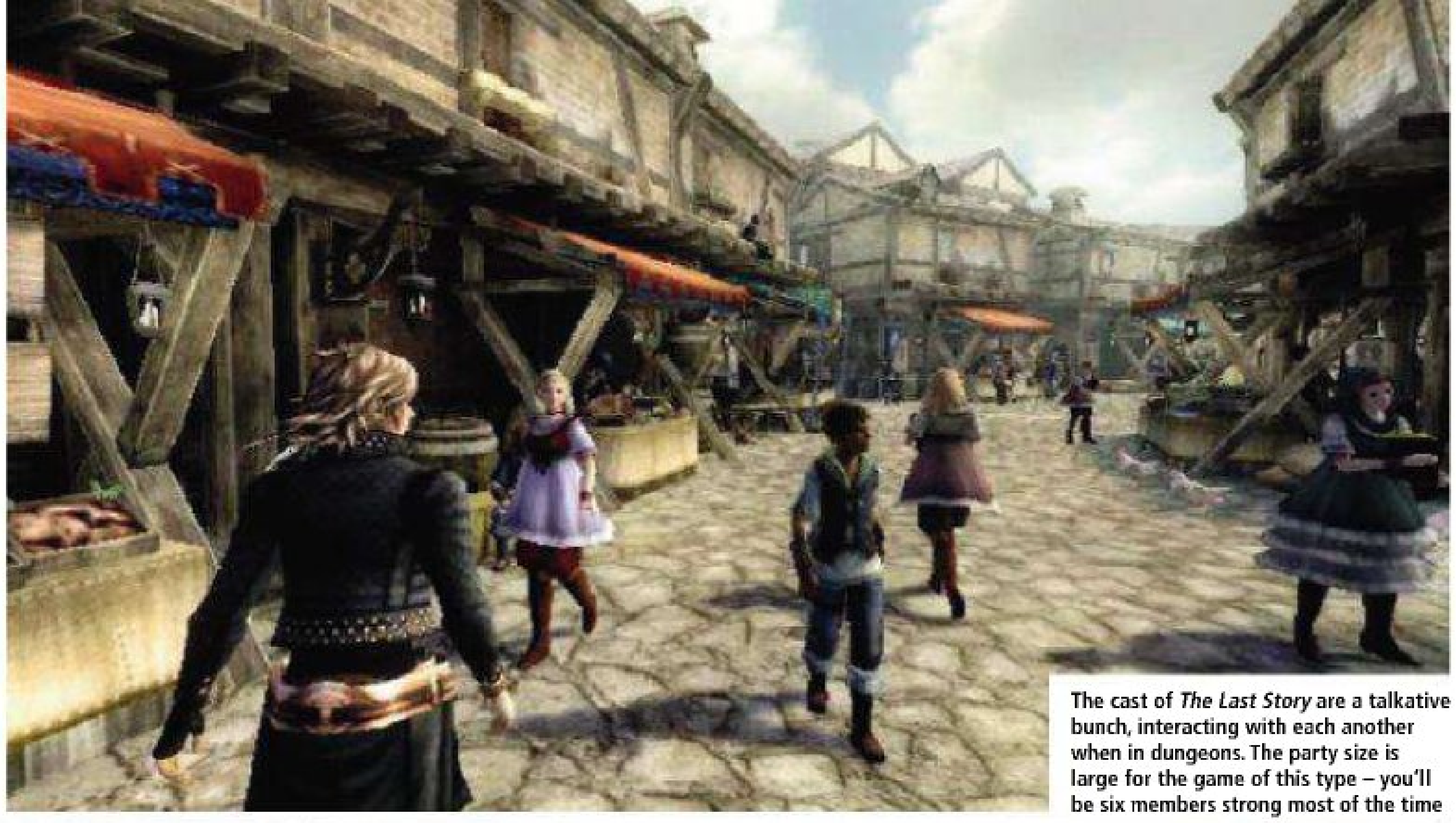
The other thing is, simply, adventure. Who knew that Unreal could power such a vast and detailed open world? It's truly seamless, the only loads coming as you leave the opening island, and presumably during the odd extended trip through a pass or tunnel. Arriving in the capital of the game's first continent, players used to solo adventuring can just walk out of the front door and keep going, leaving the quests and grind for another day.





The game's first continent – and the only one that's available in the South Korean open beta – makes most other open worlds look tiny, not to mention rather dull in terms of their scenery


16
www.pegi.info
DC UNIVERSE and all related characters and elements are trademarks of and © DC Comics.
WB GAMES LOGO, WB SHIELD: ™ & © Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.
(s10)
SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT
DC UNIVERSE ONLINE
"PlayStation", "PS3" and are trademarks or registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. is a trademark of the same company. is a registered trademark of Sony Corporation. DC UNIVERSE ONLINE software © 2010 Sony Online Entertainment LLC. All other elements © 2010 DC Comics. SOE and the SOE logo are registered trademarks of Sony Online Entertainment LLC. All other trademarks and trade names are the property of their respective owners. All rights reserved.
THE NEXT LEGEND IS YOU!™
Out early 2011
Discover more at
DCUNIVERSEONLINE.COM
ALSO AVAILABLE ON:
PC DVD-ROM
PS3
PlayStation 3
SONY
make.believe



The cast of *The Last Story* are a talkative bunch, interacting with each another when in dungeons. The party size is large for the game of this type – you'll be six members strong most of the time





Almost every aspect of a character's gear and clothing is customisable to some extent. While, naturally, there will be a statistical impact on the character by whatever's worn, some of the accessories are just for fun

The Last Story

Will MMOG mechanics inspire a fresh spin on the JRPG genre?

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **MISTWALKER**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK)**



Story's story

As inventive as *The Last Story* is elsewhere, its narrative seems more conventional – though Mistwalker is striving to avoid the sci-fi and fantasy blend that characterises many a JRPG, drawing only on the latter for its inspiration. What we've seen of the game thus far takes place in Ruli City (on Ruli Island), a quasi-medieval land to which Elza has travelled in search of work. The game's urban settings have been inspired by French and Italian medieval townships – a real-world tether that's led to some less fanciful town and architecture design.

While Hironobu Sakaguchi's latest was never likely to do justice to its concept art, the *Final Fantasy* creator's experimental RPG is squeezing all that it can out of Nintendo's hardware. Despite lacking some of the artwork's lustre, the baroque style shines through, aided by the fluid character animation that brings the *The Last Story*'s battles to vivid life.

These battles contain the game's boldest departures from the traditional JRPG template, setting out a more daring agenda than Sakaguchi's other major post-*Final Fantasy* projects. While players will only directly control main character Elza, at any point in combat the game can be paused and orders issued to his AI-controlled companions, allowing more complex strategies to be planned and deployed. A good thing too, because Elza's something of tank when it comes to combat, relying on his allies for assistance (the rest of the party can be individually assigned healing, area-of-attack or attack duties). You'll manage encounters in a MMORPG fashion, with Elza keeping as many enemies occupied as he can (using so-called 'gathering' moves) while his companions rack up the damage. Brightly coloured lines arc and criss-cross over battles, highlighting forthcoming attacks from your party members and marking out the intended recipients of enemy aggression.

Managing your party and doling out orders in the thick of battle is made simple by pointer controls, which also find use as part of *The Last Story*'s limited thirdperson shooter mechanics – Elza has a crossbow, and can pick off enemies at range (there's even a rudimentary cover system to help with avoiding return fire). When aiming, players can scan the surrounding environment for points of interest. One instance that Sakaguchi demonstrates involves a pack of elite enemies standing beneath a ceiling that's supported by a structurally weak column – aiming identifies the weakness, a party member fires off a magic attack, and within moments the enemies are lying beneath a pile of rubble. At its core, combat is powered by stats as much as reflexes, but *The Last Story*'s quasi-realtime encounters and the focus on the environments in which they take place makes for an experience more closely wedded to the gameworld than in many JRPGs. This is borne out by the spatial awareness required by the game's magic system. The first spell the player casts will form a magic circle on the ground; herding enemies within the circumference of that circle and imbuing it with secondary magical effects – Sakaguchi turns the ground to slippery ice, and then expands its circumference to trip up enemies – forms another major component of combat.



But perhaps the most striking departure from the template that Sakaguchi himself defined is the presence of online multiplayer modes. Versus mode allows players to compete in straight-up deathmatches (complete with power-ups scattered about the maps), whereas Raid mode allows players to take into co-op battles against bosses the equipment they've amassed in singleplayer. There's a hint of *Monster Hunter* about these teamwork-based encounters against oversized beasts – although it's not currently clear whether Raid mode will be offering unique battles or monsters borrowed from the main game.

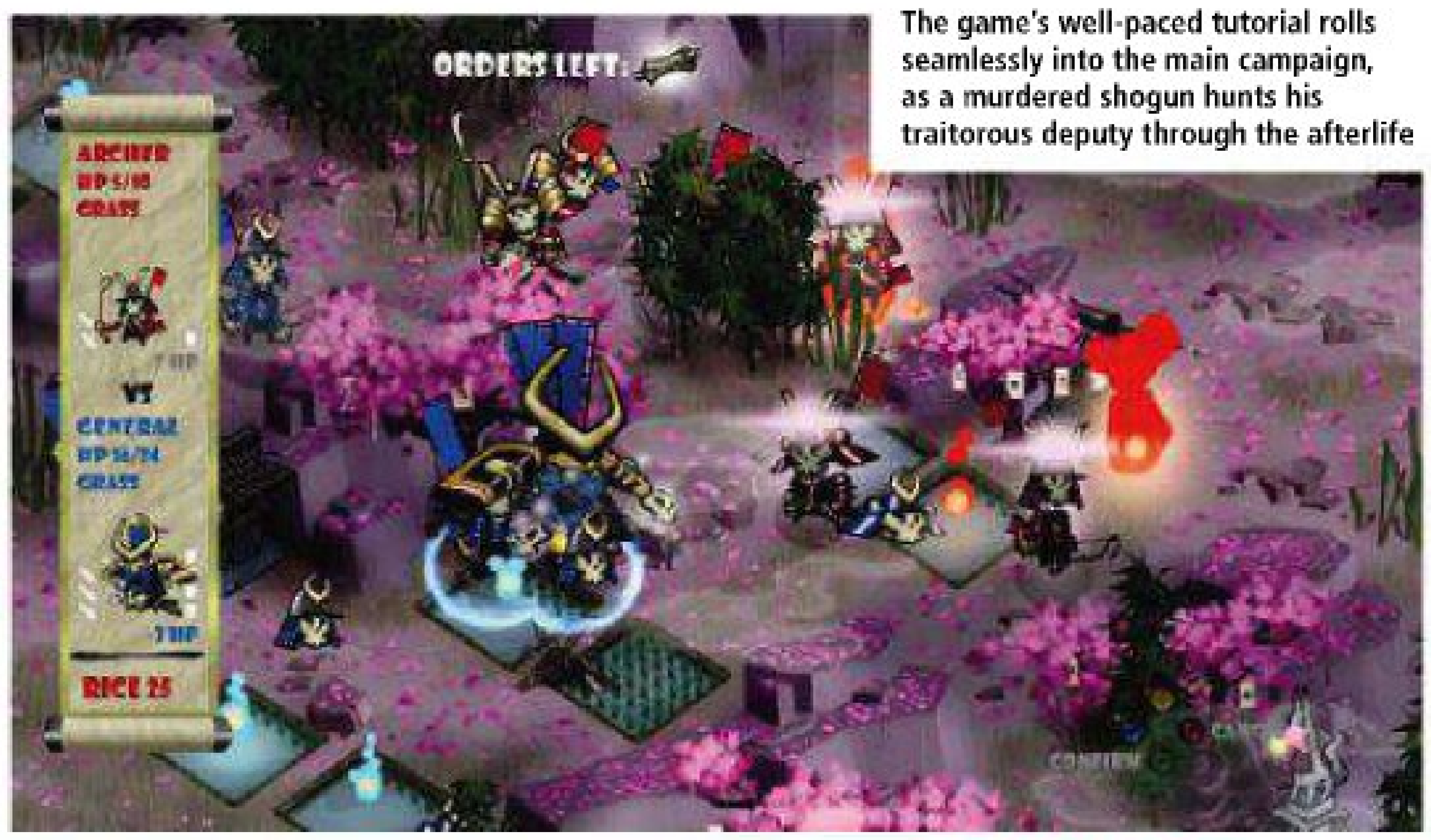
It's ironic, then, that a title seemingly making a great deal of effort to free itself from the trappings of a typical JRPG hasn't yet been given a release date outside of Japan. *The Last Story*'s MMOG-inspired mechanics, combined with its heavyweight RPG pedigree, bode well, but – at the time of writing, at least – statements from both Mistwalker and Nintendo bode less well for Sakaguchi's western fanbase.


16
www.pegi.info
THE APOCALYPSE IS COMING
18.03.11
PREORER NOW
MOTORSTORM.COM
THE GAME IS JUST THE START...
PS3
PlayStation 3
SONY
make.believe

FORMAT: **IPHONE, WINDOWS PHONE 7, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **HAUNTED TEMPLE STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2011**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E219**

Skulls Of The Shogun

A samurai's quest for unearthly vengeance heralds the resurrection of turn-based tactics



The game's well-paced tutorial rolls seamlessly into the main campaign, as a murdered shogun hunts his traitorous deputy through the afterlife





Up to four can battle it out in multiplayer – which promises to be an extremely chaotic affair. A neat twist sees you form alliances and share resources with other players, before betraying and destroying them

Nine years have passed sleepily in the turn-based tactical genre. *Advance Wars* clones have come and gone, with barely a quickening of the formula's pulse. *Skulls Of The Shogun*, meanwhile, hopes to jolt it back to life (or unlife, given the game's supernatural theme), delivering a slew of tweaks and tricks that keep the showdowns between skeletal samurai rattling along at a great pace.

On one point we've so far been sceptical: positioning is crucial in *Advance Wars* – *Skulls*' decision to do away with a movement grid entirely is a radical departure. Instead, when you select one of your skeletal minions, he's able to move anywhere within a depicted radius. He can move, attack and move again – the radius shrinking to display the remaining distance he can cover. But, as well as being intuitive, it turns out that the lack of precise grid positioning enhances the game with an alluring analogue chaos.

There's still tactical value to where you place a unit – some levels allow you to bat enemies off cliffs or into hazards, while standing shoulder-to-shoulder with allies provides a defence boost – but much of the game relies on fuzzier estimations: whether a unit will reach another in the following turn is key, but this ambiguity adds drama rather than undermines your tactical power.

The longer we've played, the more the game's other deft balancing acts become evident. The skulls of defeated units can be devoured by their foes to heal and empower, making frontline losses even more dangerous, while the ability to unleash your super-powered shogun is offset by the fact that his death ends the game. Rapidly depleting resources force movement, and sidestep the attritional quagmire that so often typifies the genre's end-game. The five-action limit per turn, meanwhile, ensures that small, nimble armies can take on much larger forces, with careful plotting. It's meticulously considered design; Haunted Temple Studios has keenly observed a well-loved genre and realised that only by departing from the tradition can *Skulls* deliver the shot in the arm that the formula so desperately needs.

Silent Hill: Downpour

The ice has melted, but the water's no safer in the return of Konami's horror franchise

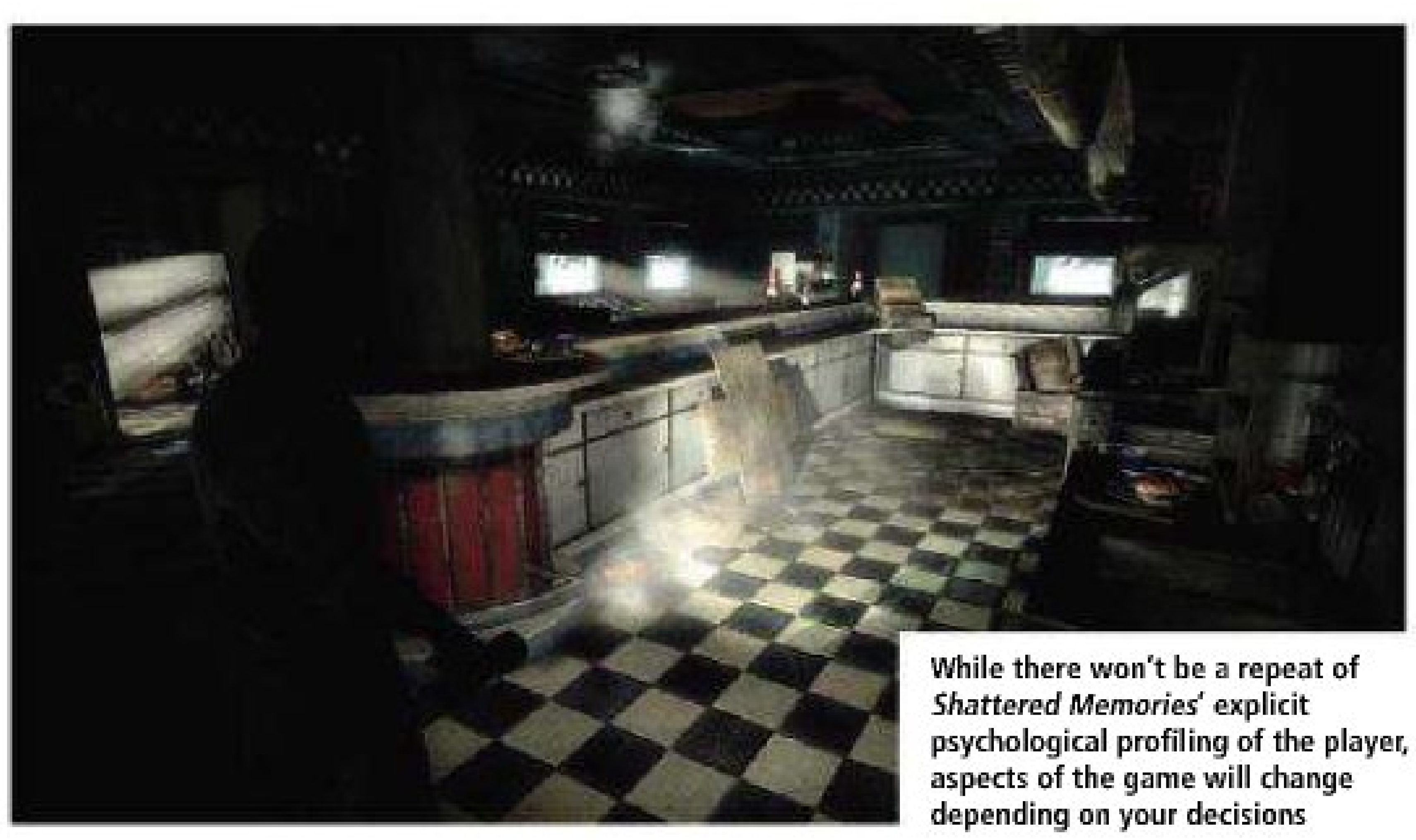
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **VATRA GAMES**
ORIGIN: **CZECH REPUBLIC**
RELEASE: **Q3 2011**

Does Konami's haunted tourist trap of a town still have the capacity to scare? A string of sequels (*Downpour* is the eighth major release in the series) have seen the mystery increasingly exposited out of the setting as the original game's blend of evocative setting and genuinely psychological horror has become increasingly obscured. Last year's contemporary-styled reimagining of the first title, *Shattered Memories*, captured the themes but forgot the fear – asking players to simply run away from the beasts populating its icy netherworld.

Downpour demands that new protagonist Murphy Pendleton confront his tormentors head on, with Czech developer Vatra Games promising a combat system pitched at the sweet spot between *Shattered Memories*' yellow-bellied focus on escape and many of the previous games' combat-heavy approach. Pendleton can carry weapons, but only one at a time, and they deteriorate with use. He might be a jailbird (his prison transportation crashes near Silent Hill at the outset of the game), but Pendleton is not the best fighter. Players are encouraged to incapacitate foes before escaping.

Downpour has also traded *Shattered Memories*' preoccupation with ice for a focus on water. Aside from the rain-soaked aesthetic, the wet stuff will be found to behave in a variety of unnatural ways throughout the game – running river-like across ceilings, for instance – providing environmental hazards alongside the usual assortment of disturbing foes.

While the *Silent Hill* series has been searching for a new groove, the genre has made meaningful moves towards reinvention with thrillers like *Heavy Rain* and chillers like *Forbidden Siren*. Hopefully *Downpour*, with its stranger-in-a-strange-land premise and back-to-basics approach, can wash away bad memories and provide a restless dream we won't want to forget.



While there won't be a repeat of *Shattered Memories*' explicit psychological profiling of the player, aspects of the game will change depending on your decisions



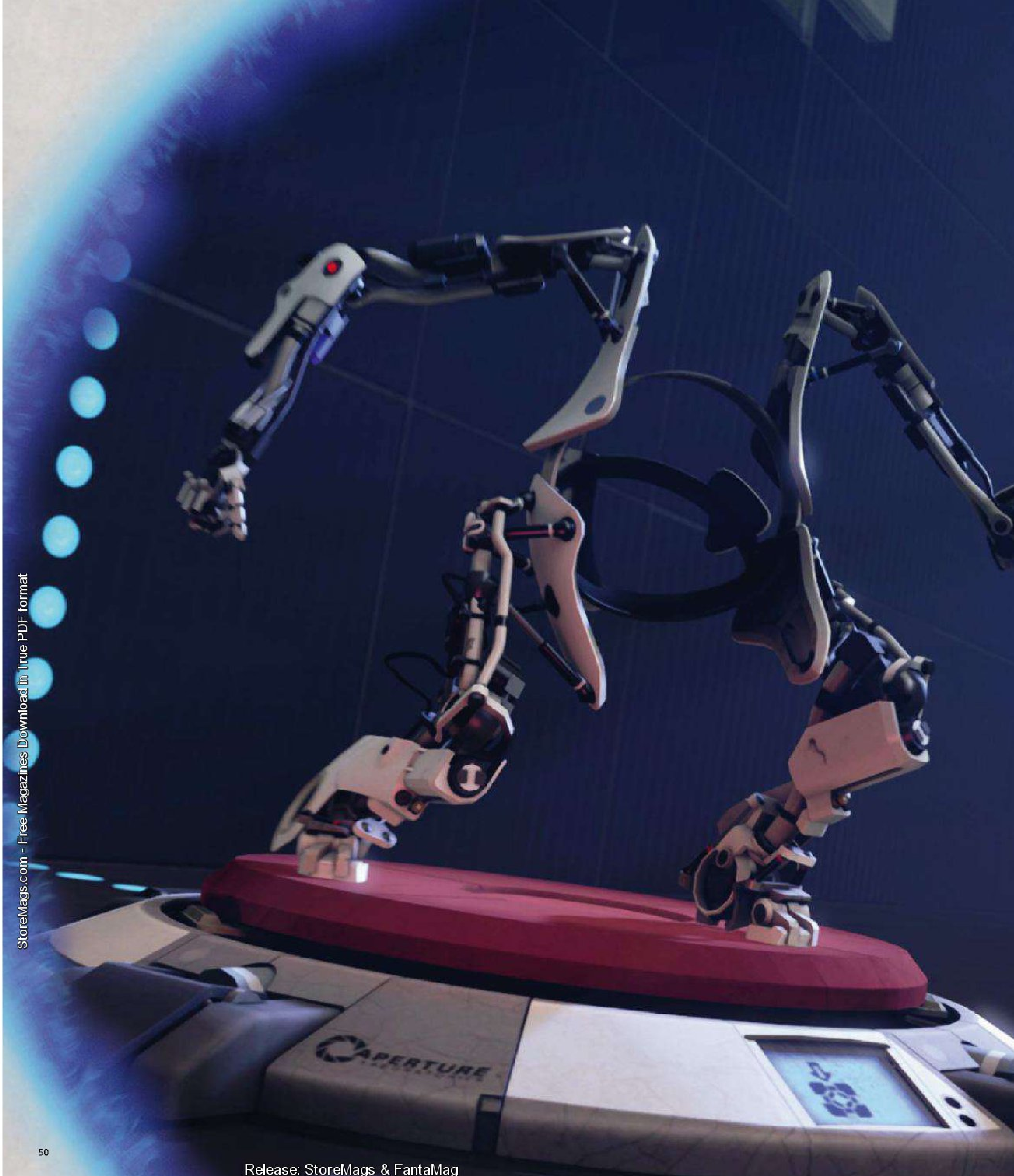


***Downpour* takes place in a part of town not visited by previous games, which means starting afresh with some new locations – there'll be no hospital visit this time**


StoreMags.com
3D Compatible Game
18
PlayStation Network
PlayStation Move
Fully playable with PlayStation®Move
Sign-up for ISA training and prove your worth in the Live Fire range to win a VIP trip to E3 at killzone.com/ultimaterecruit
STAHL
THEY ARE COMING
25.02.11
KNOW YOUR ENEMY
Stranded behind enemy lines, there's nowhere left to run: your only option is to turn and fight. Master the Helghast's fearsome weapons; make their ruthless tactics your own and turn their war machine against them. To survive on Helghan, you need to know your enemy.
PS3
PlayStation 3
KILLZONE 3
SONY
make.believe


WE'RE NOT
12
www.pegi.info


IN AZEROTH ANYMORE
RIFT
PRE-ORDER NOW! RIFTGAME.COM
TRION WORLDS IS NOT RELATED TO OR AFFILIATED WITH BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT OR AZEROTH.
©2011 Trion Worlds, Inc. All rights reserved. All other trademarks and trade names are the properties of their respective owners.
TRION WORLDS


APERTURE



THE HOLE TRUTH

WE RETURN TO APERTURE'S LABS TO INVESTIGATE THE SCIENCE AND STORYTELLING BEHIND PORTAL 2

"Remember, you're looking for a gun that makes holes. Not bullet holes. Don't worry – you'll figure it out." Valve has a knack with pithy lines, but this one really gets to the nub of *Portal*. It may have come as a shortform component part of *The Orange Box*, but it left having inspired enduring memes and appearing to have created a whole new subgenre with its deft appropriation of the firstperson shooter as a story-led puzzle game.

It's a line spoken by Wheatley, a robotic AI consisting of just an eye which rolls along a ceiling-mounted trackway and is voiced by a neurotically stuttering and burbling Stephen Merchant. He's here at *Portal 2*'s beginning to save us from imprisonment in, well, what looks like a motel room. The first time we awoke, its brown '80s décor, complete with yellowed palm-tree mural on one wall, was dingy. A long time has passed until this second waking, though – its now ruinous state only worsening when Wheatley somehow moves the entire space, setting our perspective tumbling before the walls tear apart, revealing that our room is in fact a container among many, many others containing test subjects in a vast, crumbling hangar: 10,000-odd, Wheatley says.

We've come to Valve's new studio in Bellevue, Washington, to play the early sections of both *Portal 2*'s singleplayer story and cooperative modes. There's not a lot we can imagine adding to *Portal*, which by its end had seemed to explore every dimension of its one-trick (but what a trick) gun, but that's the challenge Valve has set itself for the sequel. And what other way to approach it than with one of the oldest in the book: an apocalypse. A bygone apocalypse, anyway.

Wheatley uses our room to smash through a wall, and we fall through its floor to land in a glass cubicle just like the one in

TITLE: **PORTAL 2**
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA/VALVE**
DEVELOPER: **VALVE SOFTWARE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **APRIL 18 (US), APRIL 22 (EU)**

which *Portal* began. Now, though, Aperture Science lies quiet and broken, destroyed in the aftermath of GLaDOS' destruction at the end of that first game. A soft, male AI voice calmly intones: "We are currently experiencing technical difficulties due to circumstances of potentially apocalyptic significance beyond our control. However, thanks to emergency testing protocols, testing can continue… so science can still be done, even in the event of environmental, social, economic or structural collapse."

Yes, it's time to go back to testing. A portal opens and we catch a glimpse of ourselves – Chell, the protagonist of the first game. You may not have been surprised to learn that she'd return in the sequel, but Valve had other designs. "We thought it would be easier at first to have you start with a clean slate and have you play a different test subject," says writer **Erik Wolpaw**. "But in initial playtests, to a person, when GLaDOS woke up, everyone wanted her to recognise them."

Wheatley, then, is the new character in *Portal 2*'s singleplayer story, and Merchant's idiosyncratic staccato Bristolian burr is a fascinating choice. "We were thinking we'd have this other character that you'd be seeing a lot – you have GLaDOS and she's robotic; do you really want to listen to another? We need vocal silhouettes, which we had in *Left 4 Dead*, too," explains Wolpaw. "GLaDOS is slower-speaking and more deliberate, so we wanted something to offset that – a frantic person. Stephen Merchant does that really well. We had that in our mind – and the other thing for a videogame which is great is that he talks really fast. We've got six seconds to give you all this information."

The game's opening puzzle is simple – moving a box over a button to open the exit door, the first of a swift and elegant series of introductions to *Portal*'s core ideas that somehow make that original game, which was surely the model of a perfectly paced learning curve, almost seem clunky. We're on the hunt for the portal gun and we soon find it, after crashing through another floor, and we speed through the momentum and box-moving tests that make *Portal*-logic revelatory. It's clear, though, that breeziness

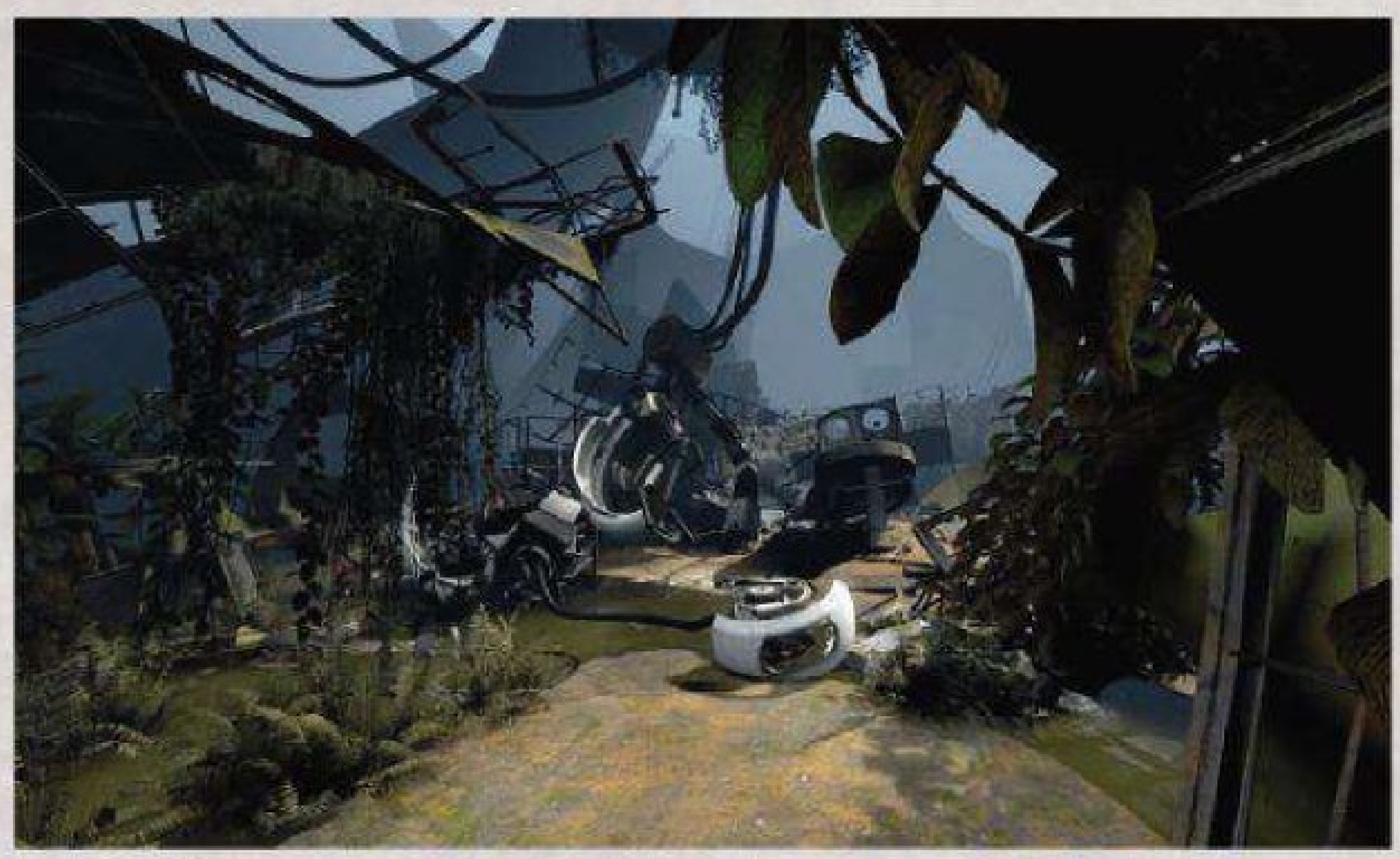


Clearly, even when the early part of the lab in which we experience the Repulsion Gel was built, the portal gun was already in existence but called, according to a faded poster, the 'quantum tunnelling device'. Catchy



Erik Wolpaw (above) wrote the original *Portal*, and also worked on *Psychonauts*

IT WARNS US OF A DANGEROUS UPCOMING PUZZLE AND PLAYS SOME DEVASTATINGLY SMOOTH HOTEL-LOBBY JAZZ TO KEEP US CALM

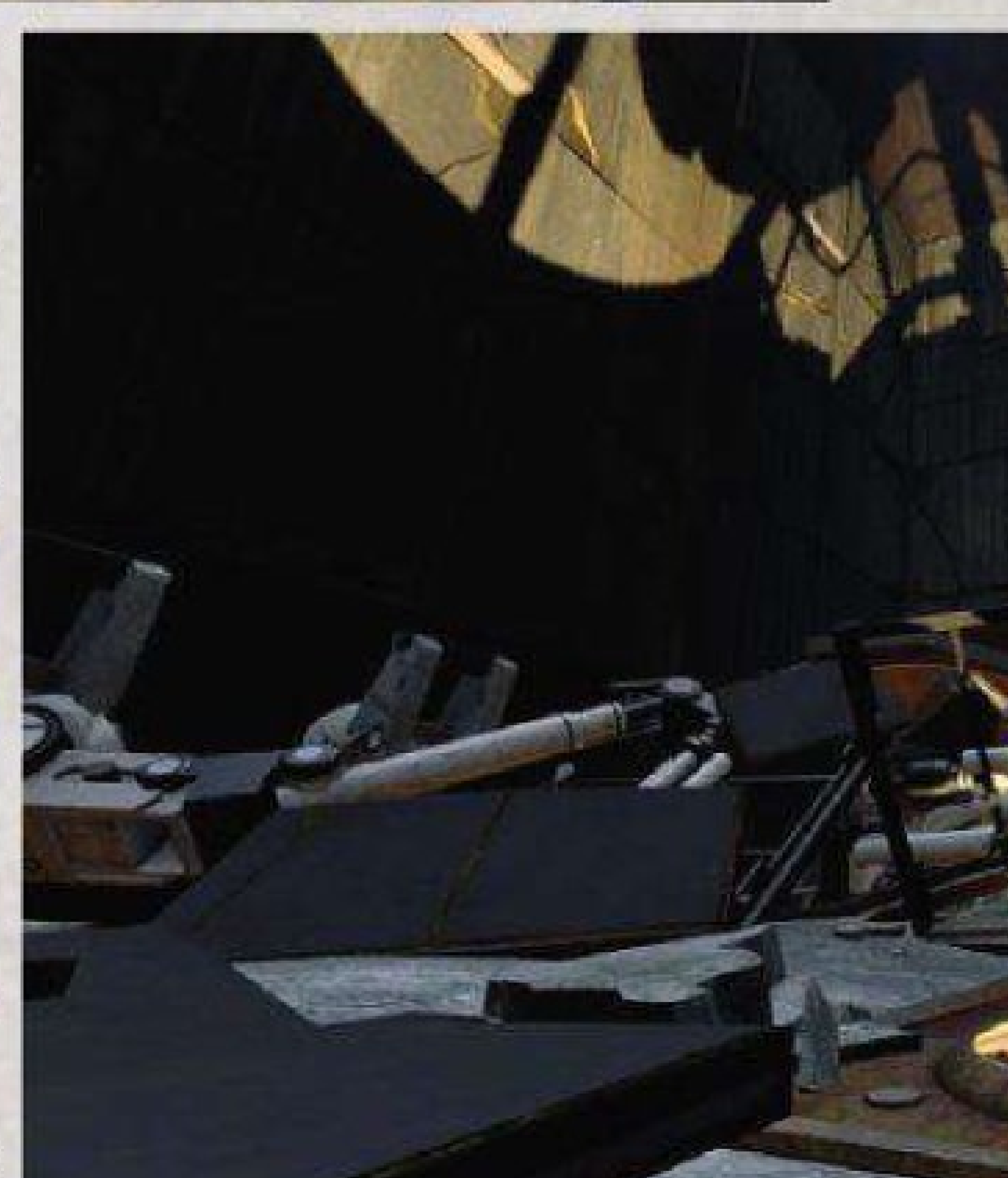


CO-OP CONNECT

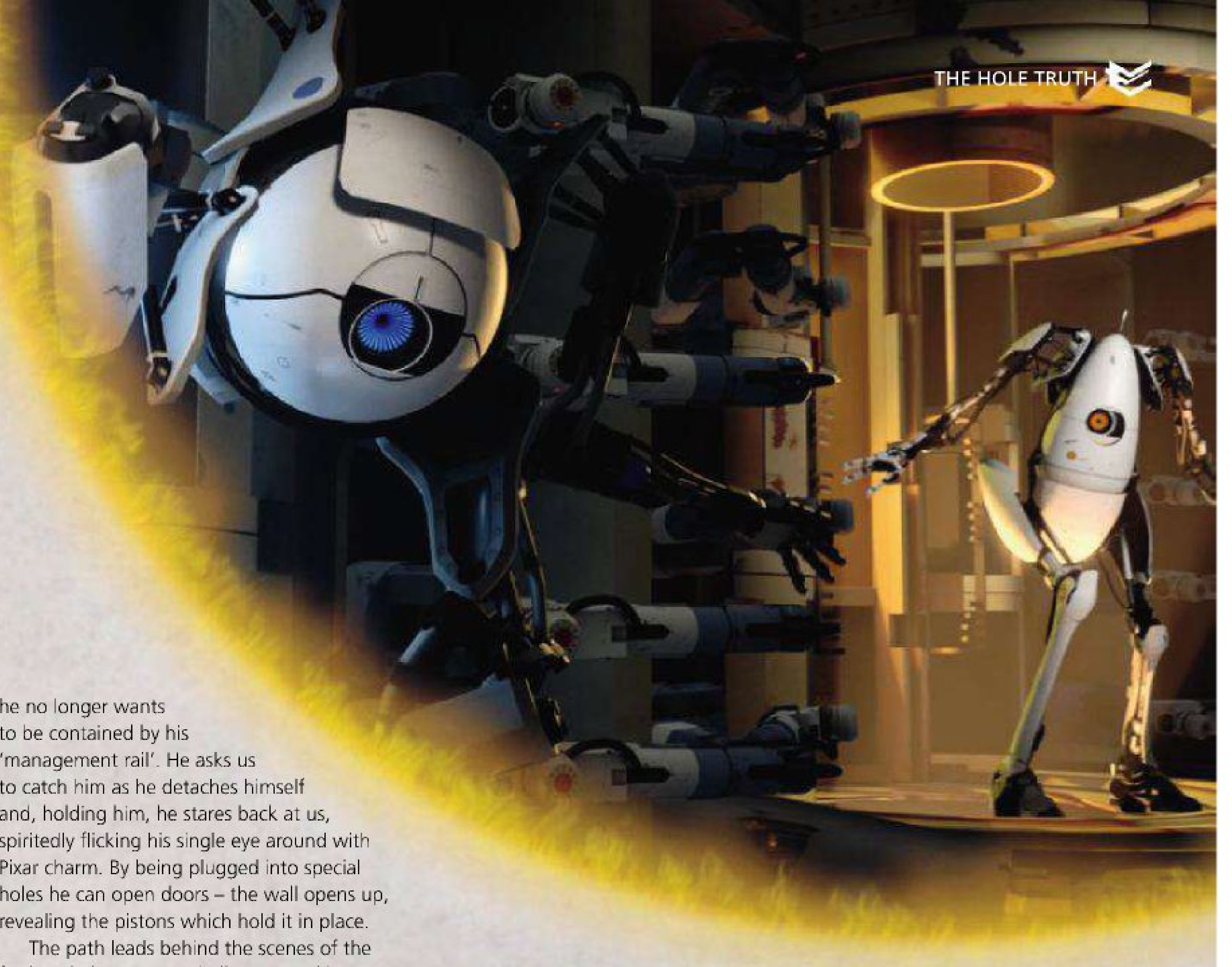
***Portal 2*'s co-op mode is largely down to Valve's realisation that people played the first game together, one controlling, others advising, but *Left 4 Dead* played a part, too. "We have letters from guys in the military who were overseas and playing *Left 4 Dead* with their wives back here, because playing this game they could talk about it and have this experience," says Faliszek. "If I'm writing a letter or chatting on the phone, I'm talking about how crappy where I am and how crappy it is where she is. And we're having a crappy time. But playing the game, we're talking about the game, we're having fun, almost as if she's sitting on the couch. Bringing that experience to where people can live in the moment through the game – we have a lot of feedback about it."**







As Wheatley, Stephen Merchant certainly gets through his lines. "We would write everything out and he went crazy on it," says Wolpaw. "We got some great nags – there are a bunch of places that if you don't move the game forward he'll sit there and rattle on for, in some cases, five or six minutes"



of this sequence is the result of serious work at Valve.

"*Portal* was a big gameplay training arc for the most part – say 80 per cent was bringing you through all these new concepts related to the original portal mechanic," says Wolpaw. "We knew we couldn't just do that again so we spent a lot of time looking at the original *Portal* levels and trying to distil them down to what we needed to teach players right off the bat to get those concepts across." Not that the team was afraid to just repeat puzzles. "That was a lot of time and something we were worried about, because we didn't want it to be boring for people who had played before, making them feel there was something new to see, even though they're solving a puzzle they've solved before. There are pretty basic puzzles and a bunch of them are old puzzles from *Portal*."

The atmosphere is eerily tranquil. The CCTV cameras don't follow you around; birds call; the male computer voice is blandly upbeat. "Testing is the future, and the future starts with you." It warns us of a dangerous upcoming puzzle and plays some devastatingly smooth hotel-lobby jazz to keep us calm. It quickly, mercifully, stalls back into silence.

Apart from the general destruction all around and the lack of GLaDOS, little seems to have changed from the original game. The HUD, minimal as it is, is identical, and the portal gun works just as it always did. But *Portal 2* is clearly the result of a few lessons learned by *Left 4 Dead*, with the HUD displaying the position of your portals through walls.

And the route we take is much less ordained. Even in these early puzzles the route veers off the facility's intended course, through broken walls and floors. Wheatley comes and goes, too, until he decides that he no longer wants to be contained by his 'management rail'. He asks us to catch him as he detaches himself and, holding him, he stares back at us, spiritedly flicking his single eye around with Pixar charm. By being plugged into special holes he can open doors – the wall opens up, revealing the pistons which hold it in place.

GLaDOS moves the walls around with shuddering power in an effort to rebuild the facility. Valve's ability to invest machines with human emotions is yet unmatched



The path leads behind the scenes of the facility, dark cavernous halls traversed by metal walkways and large, transparent tubes filled with weighted storage cubes. In one, a lone turret lies on its side, plaintively calling "hello". Before long, though, we reach somewhere rather more familiar, a vast hall in which Wheatley warns "she" might still be alive, and will "almost certainly kill us". It's the area in which GLaDOS lived until she was destroyed at the end of *Portal*, and we pick our way among her torn fragments. "What a nasty piece of work she was, a proper maniac," says Wheatley.

We jump down a deep hole, establishing the cushioning properties of Chell's knee springs – being a Valve game, every action is tuned to educate – and find our objective, the main breaker room which houses the switch for an escape pod. Naturally, we do something rather less intentional instead, culminating in a familiar voice saying: "We've both said a lot of things that you're going to regret, but I think we can put our differences behind us. For science, we must. I will say, though, that since you went to all the trouble of waking me up, you must really, really love to test. I love it, too."

Subtle yet densely detailed with a combination of playful reminders and warm introductions for experienced and new players alike, it's one of the smartest game openings we've experienced. And it has to get through all this stuff fast, because *Portal 2* is certainly not about rehashing the same mechanics and puzzles of the original. "The big goal for *Portal 2* was to make you think that you really understand a lot about portals but then feed you a lot of mechanics that make portals do things you didn't expect or really empowered you while keeping that core simplicity," says project lead **Josh Weier**.

POINT SCORING

Always scientifically malevolent, GLaDOS makes a point of picking one player out over the other with praise in co-op, saying after we inadvertently kill Faliszek, "Orange just taught Blue a valuable lesson in trust – for that Orange has received 17 Science Collaboration Points." She continually arbitrarily awards points, and the hub from which co-op mode runs features a screen which tracks pointless statistics, like the number of steps each player has walked. "It's a joke; point scoring to tease you a bit," says Wolpaw of the scoring, but admits that players still tend to take it seriously. "That was the most fascinating thing we discovered – we were literally randomly assigning points; GLaDOS would say for no reason, Orange was getting five points. And it wasn't even points – four pineapples – and people would immediately try to figure out what they did to get the points so they could get more. It caused a massive distraction."



Valve, along with its valve (above), moved into its new studio last spring, finally combining all of its offices

We skip ahead to an entirely new setting. We're in a massive geodesic dome, and gone is the air of clean futurism. "One of the things we wanted to do was to expand the world of Aperture, literally – the backstory, the history – to show players more about the facility," explains Weier. In fact, when all this was built, futurism was still in the future; it has a blunt, dated and militaristic air, with stencilled lettering over olive-painted metal, and complementing it is a new voice barking over an echoing PA system that contrasts with GLaDOS's acoustically tuned speakers. It's JK Simmons, the actor behind Juno's father and the Daily Bugle editor in Sam Rami's Spider-Man, playing Cave Johnson, the founder of Aperture Science, via pre-recorded tape. "All right, let's get started! This first test involves something the lab boys call Repulsion Gel."

We're introduced to one of the gels which add new dimensions to *Portal*, ideas that have come from yet another set of Digipen students. *Portal*'s roots, of course, lie in Digipen student project *Narbacular Drop*;

Valve is producing DLC for *Portal 2*, though Wolpaw says details aren't ready for release quite yet. Helpfully, he does say that it'll "have something to do with the story"







Portal 2's embellishments on that core are developed from *Tag: The Power Of Paint*, an IGF finalist project which, funnily enough, Weier says was inspired by *Portal*. Featuring spatial puzzles and a special gun, it hinged on the idea of paint which changed the properties of surfaces – green makes the player bounce on them, red accelerates the player, and blue allows the player to walk on them, even if they're vertical.

Repulsion Gel is a refined version of that first paint, and fitted into this new layer of *Portal* fiction as a 'dietetic pudding substitute' which worked by making food bounce off the stomach walls – and then out of the mouth – and caused something of a public outcry. But Aperture has found an alternative application: "We haven't entirely nailed down what element it is yet, but I'll tell you this: it's a lively one, and it does not like the human skeleton," clarifies Johnson over the PA.

"It would have been tough to make *Portal 2* doing more straight portal puzzles," says Wolpaw. He and the team didn't want to add another gun or gadget, which may have upset the logical and functional elegance of the portal device. The gels, instead, complement it. "*Portal* in general is about your relationship with surfaces," Wolpaw continues. "In *Portal* the surfaces were binary – you could either put a portal on them or you couldn't. The paint allows us to change the surface properties, which gave us a bunch of interesting things to do, and because it's liquid, it flows through portals."





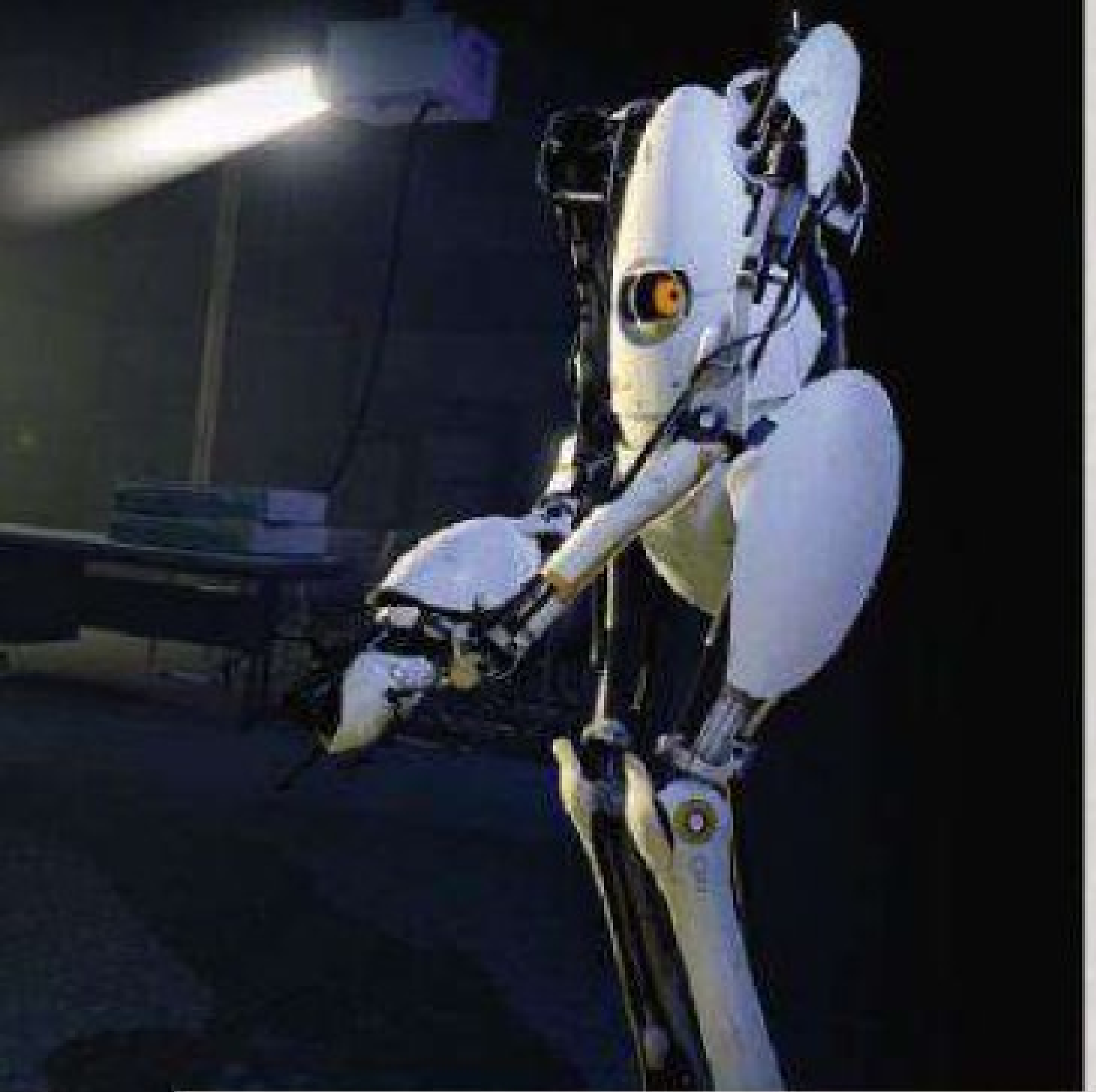
Portal 2's project lead Josh Weier (top), and writer Chet Faliszek, whose CV also includes the *Left 4 Dead* series



"THE PAINT ALLOWS US TO CHANGE THE SURFACE PROPERTIES, AND BECAUSE IT'S LIQUID, IT FLOWS THROUGH PORTALS"

The room in which the game opens is completely destroyed by the time we get to leave, showing physical properties we hope are developed later on in the game





The co-op levels aren't just based in GLaDOS's testing chambers – we play one in which we need to find a delightfully anachronistic LaserDisc in order to progress

The first puzzle presents us with a trench coated with Repulsion Gel in front of a high ledge, which we need to reach. The feel of the bounce is thoroughly satisfying and accompanied by a little bloopy scale of notes – judging its momentum and pitch is surprisingly natural. The puzzles soon begin exploring the notion that the longer the drop, the higher the bounce, while a later one has us bounce between two vertical, gel-coated walls over a long trench.

They fit very naturally with *Portal*'s fundamentals, and retain the same pace of discovery, the puzzles initially appearing inscrutable but then unfurling as you explore the options. "It's not about making it more difficult, it's about expanding the experience," says writer **Chet Faliszek**.

We're left to wonder how the other revealed gel, Propulsion, which accelerates your motion, will do that. Nor do we play with Excursion Funnels, which can transport you or other objects through the air, or Pneumatic Diversity Vents, which can suck gel and objects through them. But we do get to play with Hard Light Bridges in *Portal 2*'s other big feature, co-op.

"Hello and welcome to the Aperture Science Computer-Aided Enrichment Centre," says GLaDOS to the mode's two robot stars, Blue and Orange. One barrel-chested and squat, the other taller and more graceful, they sport fantastically characterful animation – perhaps Valve's best so far. "We could kind of cheat with *Left 4 Dead* because you simply don't notice how little animation goes with them," says Faliszek. "You're running along and they're yelling, but here you're looking where the other guy is pointing. That all ties into this really intimate [relationship] – it's akin to dancing together."

Often separating players, either physically with walls or practically by asking them to perform different roles, *Portal 2* arms the two robots with a set of gestures which include waving and high-fiving and a ping tool to point out areas. You can also view what the other player can see. "You're going to end up talking about what you're doing with your friend," says Faliszek.

"It's one of the things we learned with *Left 4 Dead* where [there's] this base story, but we want to pull [it] back a little bit." What we have are GLaDOS's encouragements and chastisements, arbitrarily singling out one player over the other, and revealing her hatred for humans.

We play a level in which one player must traverse a vertically orientated maze while the other raises and lowers sections – and offers tips to navigation – so they can pass. It's temptingly easy to crush the maze-runner. In another, one player must help the other to take a ball to a high platform by catching them on a Hard Light Bridge as they bounce on an Aerial Faith Plate. The interplay feels dynamic and open, always demanding communication and offering players of differing skills a choice over which role they want to play.

The puzzles present different balances of execution and deduction, but in the parts we play there are fewer of the more frustrating moments in the original in which you knew how to solve a puzzle but found the execution finicky. In fact, pruning these out of *Portal 2* was a significant part of Valve's legendarily extensive playtesting. Witness too the replacement of *Portal*'s slow-moving energy balls by lasers and light bridges, which instantly reveal the success of your actions.

The result, a product of Valve's learnings from how players approached the original as well as *Left 4 Dead*, is more immediate than the original, even more tuned and even more witty. And that's some achievement – especially without any meaningful competition from a subgenre that it looked like *Portal* would surely inspire. "I was a little bit surprised, and *Portal* did pretty well; it seemed to have some impact in the game development community, but it didn't really lead to a flood of firstperson puzzle games," says Wolpaw. "There have been some: *The Ball*, *Tag* – the game we took – and *Twin Sector*."

"It's harder than people realise to balance the right amount of difficulty," says Faliszek.

"And because we did it close to first, we got to steal the one fiction that actually works, which is a crazy puzzle science facility," says Wolpaw. "There's no other story that fits. Good luck, suckers! Actually, *The Ball* came up with one, which was you were in some sort of tomb with traps. But I like the firstperson puzzle game – I'm kinda sad there haven't been more since then."

Perhaps it's because *Portal* set such a high bar to begin with. Wolpaw's right – there's simply no other place worth setting a puzzle game than Aperture Science. And Valve's wry twist on the relationship between game player, game and game maker is about to get a completely fresh airing. We can't wait to get back to testing.

GEL GENEOLOGY

The concept for the gels was directly a result of Valve hiring the Digipen team that made *Tag: The Power Of Paint*, though it wasn't taken on to specifically work on *Portal 2*; the realisation that paint would make a good addition to the puzzle set came later. Besides, a project Valve engineers had been working on for the Source engine would provide another reason for the gel to get into the game: they'd made what they called 'the blob', an undulating mass of liquid. "We didn't really know what to do with it," Wolpaw admits. "So we had this thing we were sitting on which came out of some design experiments after *The Orange Box* shipped, and we thought it was great because it looked really cool, it moves in an interesting way. So [the gels] were a convergence of coincidences."



A close look at the black screen in Valve's foyer reveals some familiar symbology...



MOD REMOULDING

DOTA 2'S PROJECT LEAD EXPLAINS HOW VALVE IS TRANSFORMING ONE OF GAMING'S FAVOURITE MODS



Valve has a history of identifying, and then absorbing, great talent. Apart from the *Narbacular Drop* and *Tag* students who've been instrumental to *Portal* and *Portal 2*, it has acquired Turtle Rock Studios, which made *Left 4 Dead*, and the mod creators of *Alien Swarm* and *Counter-Strike*. A recent addition to the fold is IceFrog, a modder who made his name running the breakout Defense Of The Ancients variant DoTA Allstars.

The secretive developer didn't formulate the genre, of course. The now hugely popular realtime strategy hybrid – Valve estimates over 20 million players – developed from a mod of *Warcraft III* by Eul in 2003. In its pure and famously hardcore form, two teams, each player taking on a different hero, must get to the opposition's stronghold and destroy its 'ancient' while guarding their own, establishing defensive towers and encountering AI 'creeps' on the way.

And IceFrog didn't even create Allstars – that plaudit goes to Guinsoo, who went on to help create Riot Games' highly successful take on the genre, *League Of Legends*. But since 2005, IceFrog has refined and polished Allstars into a dense and deep matrix of abilities and over a hundred different characters that has seen it take starring roles at Blizzcon and most of the east Asian e-Sports tournaments.

In October 2009, IceFrog announced he had joined Valve, and a year later the fruits of his collaboration were revealed: he was bringing DoTA Allstars lock, stock and barrel into Source as *Dota 2*, including versions of the same maps. Why so conservative? "We were surprised at how good so many of the decisions that were being made were," answers Valve's project lead **Erik Johnson**. "Us going in and thinking that we can improve on a product that a really talented person had been improving on for five years is kind of a weird way to approach it."

Dota 2 will be getting some modern,



***Dota 2* project lead Erik Johnson (above) is overseeing a roster that includes (clockwise from right) the Bloodseeker, the Morphling, Lina and the Drow Ranger**







high-gloss improvements, of course. For a start, it's no longer tied to *Warcraft III*'s 2002 2D engine, so it'll look a lot prettier, and it will feature the built-in matchmaking and community tools for teams that are noticeably missing from Allstars. It will also have spectator and match recording functionality that Johnson hopes will help foster the vibrant commentator culture that has graced *StarCraft II*. "Some of the commentators are just awesome," he says. "There's a lot of people out there that do that, and it's a great way for people to learn the game."

Which points towards another ambition for this fabulously complex and demanding game: making it more accessible. But not easier. "When I think about products that are hard to play or hard to approach, they don't get 20 million people playing it," says Johnson. "So, given that data, we're pretty hesitant to make the game easier to play, because a lot of the reason that the game has been so successful is down to the depth of the product." Coaching players in their first few hours is one way to go about it, as well as the introduction of bots to allow players to test and practice new strategies.

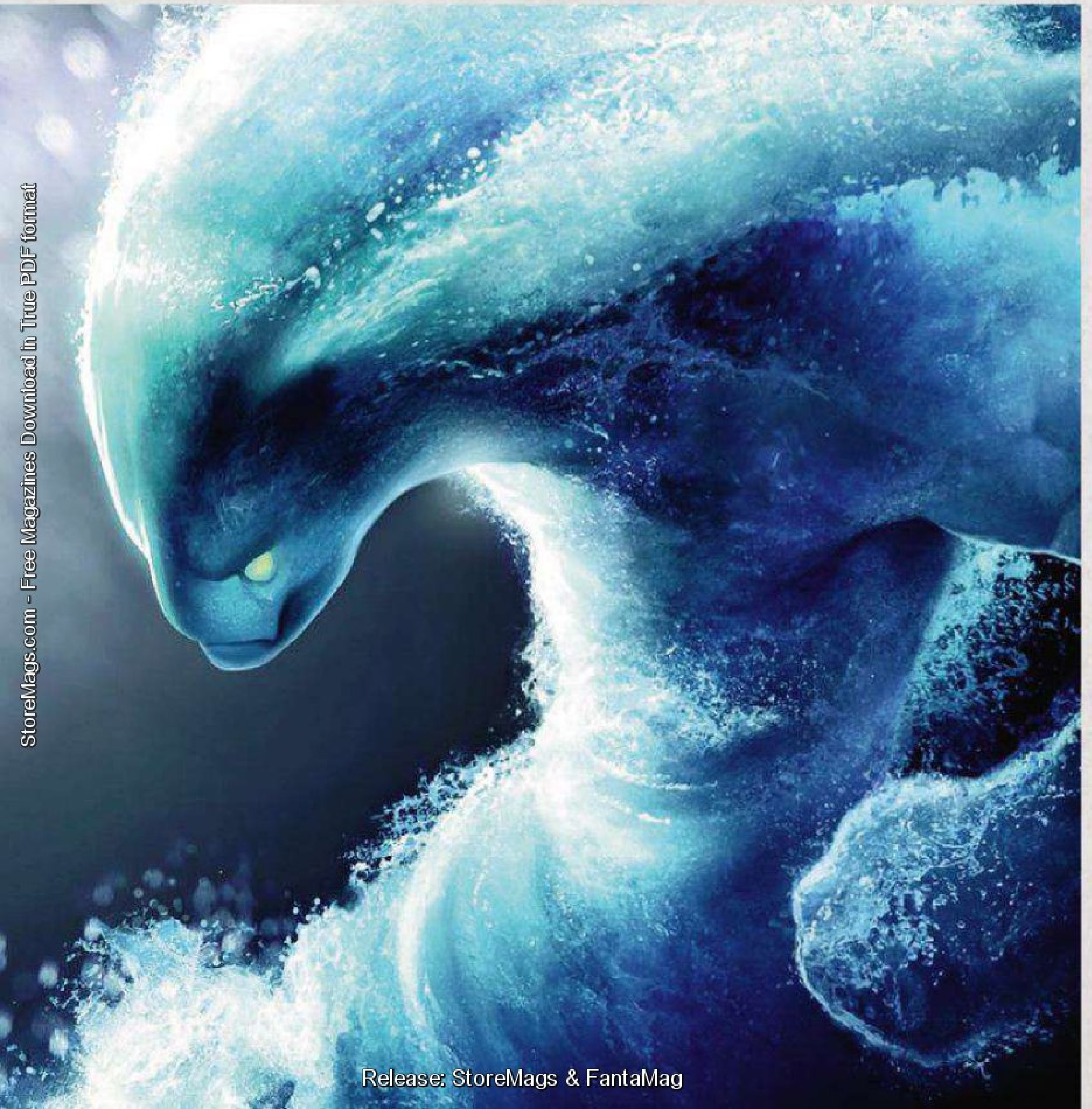
Dota 2 has not emerged without a fair degree of controversy, mostly around the trademarking of its name. Guinsoo (real name Steve Feak) and other representatives of Riot Games called for the DotA name to remain the property of the community, before filing for the name 'DOTA'. "We're doing all the same things we do for any product like *Half-Life*, *Counter-Strike*, *Day Of Defeat* or anything like that," counters Johnson.

"THERE'S A HUGE AUDIENCE THAT LOVES THE PRODUCT, SO OUR GOALS ARE TO MAKE AS MANY OF THOSE LOVE THIS PRODUCT TOO"





Doug Lombardi (top) says that Valve's experience with *Counter-Strike* will help it in building on the original DotA (above)



But *Dota 2* remains a fascinating project for Valve to tackle, an attempt to take a community-built game and rebuild it as a commercial one – and add Valve's attitude to long-term support. "But it's not terribly unlike what we did for *Counter-Strike*," adds **Doug Lombardi**. "The first time we put out commercial versions of *Counter-Strike*, they were basically cleaned-up versions of the mods, and then it grew from there."

So can it have the same global acclaim that *Counter-Strike* has inspired, even with other commercial projects already gaining traction, including Funcom's *Bloodline Champions*, S2 Games' *Heroes Of Newerth* and, of course, *League Of Legends*? And with IceFrog continuing his support for a version of DotA Allstars outside of his job at Valve? Even with the original mods still fully active? "Well, I think it's clearly a genre that's getting a lot of attention all of a sudden," Johnson says. "And DotA itself has this strange aspect to it that it's the biggest game in the world that no one has heard of.

"We expect many millions of players to play the game. There's this huge audience out there that really loves the product, so our goals are definitely to make as many of those players love this product too. I also think there's an audience in the group of people who've played a lot of our games who maybe haven't played a lot of DotA before and would perhaps like to give it a try once we ship it."

And Valve, with its own vast and reverential community, is surely the seal to *Dota 2*'s almost certain future success. It might be a genre that the company has never tackled before, but sometimes a name's all a project needs. And in this case, it doesn't even have to be *Dota*.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

NINTENDO INVITES GAMERS TO CLIMB INTO THE WONDERLAND OF GLASSES-FREE 3D

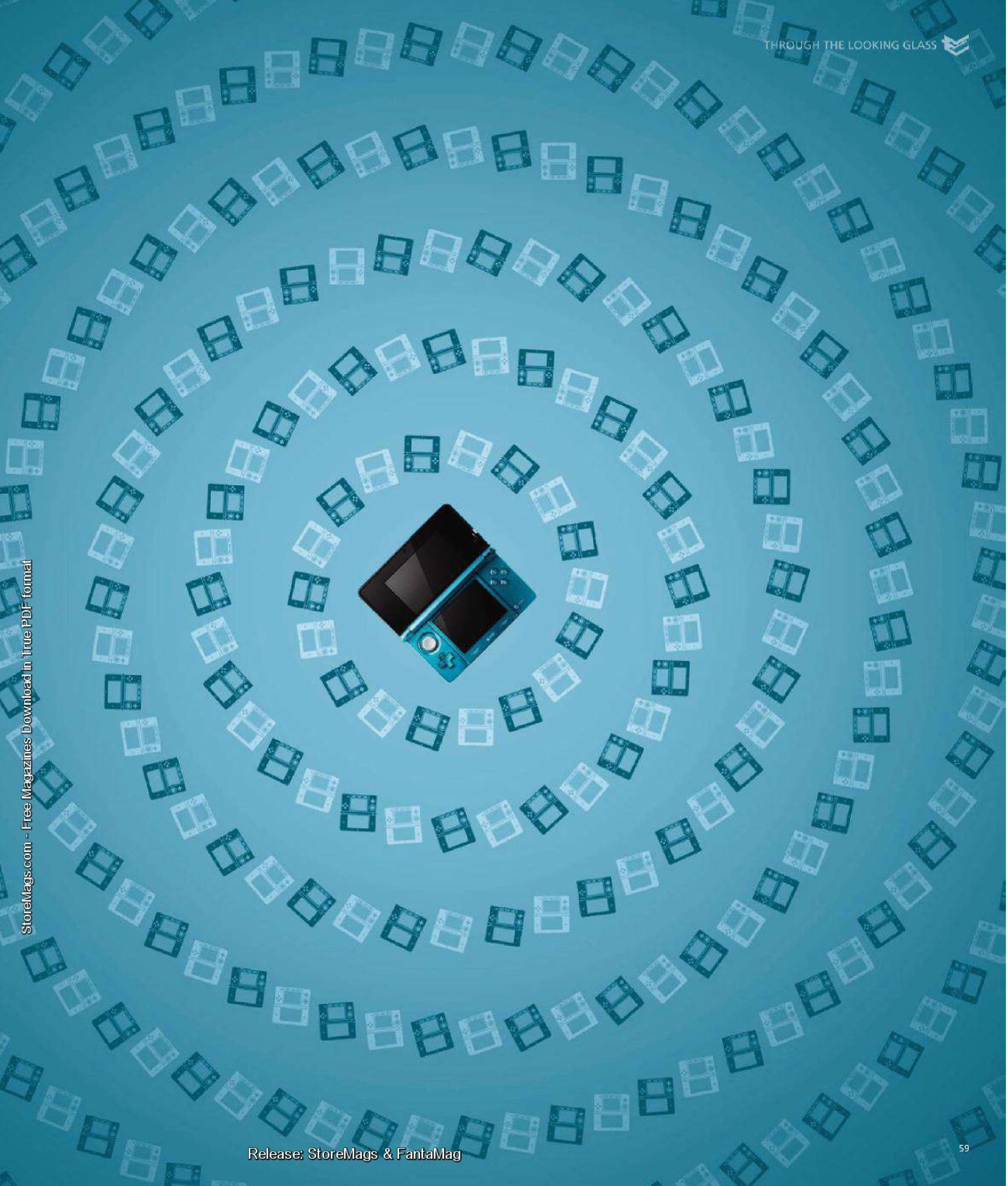
Amsterdam's Expo Haarlemmermeer building feels remote, as if its rural surroundings and adjacent farm plots were merely a ploy to discourage foreign visitors conducting business there from wandering off in search of a diversion. If you were feeling charitable, you might describe the Expo centre itself as 'spartan', or perhaps 'warehouse chic'. On this soggy January afternoon, in a nondescript part of the Netherlands beneath an overcast sky, it feels like Nintendo has chosen to stage the European preview event for its 3DS – its revolutionary new glasses-free 3D handheld – inside the greyscale world of a Game Boy cartridge circa 1989.

An oddly prosaic venue for such an auspicious hardware exhibition, it would seem. But just as your expectations of a glitzy videogame preview event fizzle out, you step through the front doors on to plush, wall-to-wall red carpet. Simply Irresistible lipstick red. Coke can red. Bull-taunting matador cape red. Plumber dungarees red. The contrast between the dreariness outside and this vivid interior decor echoes the manner in which Nintendo hopes to woo consumers into the 3DS fold: create a visual experience so immediately striking that competing entertainment options feel lacklustre by comparison.

The familiar refrain about this new handheld's 3D effect being 'impossible to capture in words – you have to see it for yourself' has become an unofficial marketing catchphrase for the 3DS. The media has certainly done its part to relay this sentiment far and wide. All the while Nintendo dutifully furrows its brow over the 'challenges' of conveying its product's glasses-free 3D effect via stubbornly two-dimensional advertising channels. Inwardly, it must be ecstatic about this so-called 'messaging dilemma', as it does nothing but stoke curiosity and fuel interest in the device's enigmatic display technology.

Even if the assembled crowd has been repeatedly told they have to see the effect to believe it, they'll have to wait a bit longer for that encounter. First: an hour-long stage presentation. Hosted by Jonathan Ross and live-streamed around the world, Nintendo's presentation offers attendees a concise overview of its hardware and functionality. Stylish video spots illustrate the console's networking features, including StreetPass and SpotPass, which facilitate interactions between 3DS consoles in the wild and enable passive delivery of new game and media content, respectively.

A handful of Japanese thirdparty developers, including *Super Street Fighter*





The hardware's front-facing camera allows users to snap a picture of themselves, which can then be used by the device's Mii Maker application to create a starting template for your Mii creation. You can fine-tune your features from there in the familiar manner

IV 3D producer Yoshinori Ono, the lead devs behind Konami's *Pro Evolution Soccer 3D* and Team Ninja head Yosuke Hayashi, take the stage to discuss the finer points of their contributions to the 3DS's launch lineup. Ubisoft CEO **Yves Guillemot** emerges long enough to say he is "amazed at the possibilities of the machine" and introduce the eight 3DS games his company has in the works.

Aside from the announcement of 3DS's March 25 launch date, no new information is revealed. No 3DS *Metroid*. No 3DS *Mario*. Accordingly, no fanboy whoops to punctuate the attentive quiet. Nintendo's 3DS presentation feels like a protracted, articulately worded grace before supper. No one specific aspect is particularly offputting, but the exercise as a whole feels a bit too rigidly ceremonial, considering everyone assembled is dying to taste what the chef has prepared. Following the presentation, doors to the left of the stage open, leading into the hands-on area. The crowd flows in a sweeping tidal motion toward the gameplay area, toward the glow of that mesmerising 3D display.

In a 3DS-themed instalment of his Iwata Asks feature for the company's website, Nintendo president **Satoru Iwata** and right-hand man Shigeru Miyamoto recall the question former Nintendo head Hiroshi Yamauchi routinely posed to internal game developers: "Can you make it jump out?"

Casual observers might assume the 3DS hardware went into development the moment Avatar box-office receipts began fluttering down from the sky like a ticker-tape parade, but Nintendo's research into 3D technology stretches back many years.

The much-maligned Virtual Boy, Nintendo's first stab at launching a 3D gaming platform back in 1995, all but exploded on the launch pad. Not only was it awkwardly positioned from a marketing standpoint, but the device's monochromatic, wireframe approach to 3D felt out of step with the increasingly rich graphics players enjoyed on 16bit consoles. After shipping just 800,000 units to retail worldwide, Nintendo euthanised the poor Boy.

ASIDE FROM THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF 3DS'S LAUNCH DATE, NO NEW INFORMATION IS REVEALED. NO 3DS METROID. NO 3DS MARIO. ACCORDINGLY, NO FANBOY WHOOPS

The Virtual Boy episode gave Nintendo valuable experience. Its products have always had, as part of their DNA, a social element. It's no coincidence that the company's flagship Japanese game console had the word 'family' baked into its Famicom handle. Even if the game happened to be a singleplayer experience, Nintendo's products have invited bystanders to bask in the refracted joy of playing. The Virtual Boy hardware's face-wrapping goggles not only made users look ridiculous, but the privacy of its display mocked the curiosity of would-be shoulder surfers.

"If it hadn't been for the failure of the Virtual Boy system," says Iwata, "so many of our people might not have said: 'As long as special glasses are necessary, 3D is impossible'."

The GameCube platform, which launched in 2001, was built with an eye on stereoscopic 3D. Nintendo even

NINTENDOGS & CATS

PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



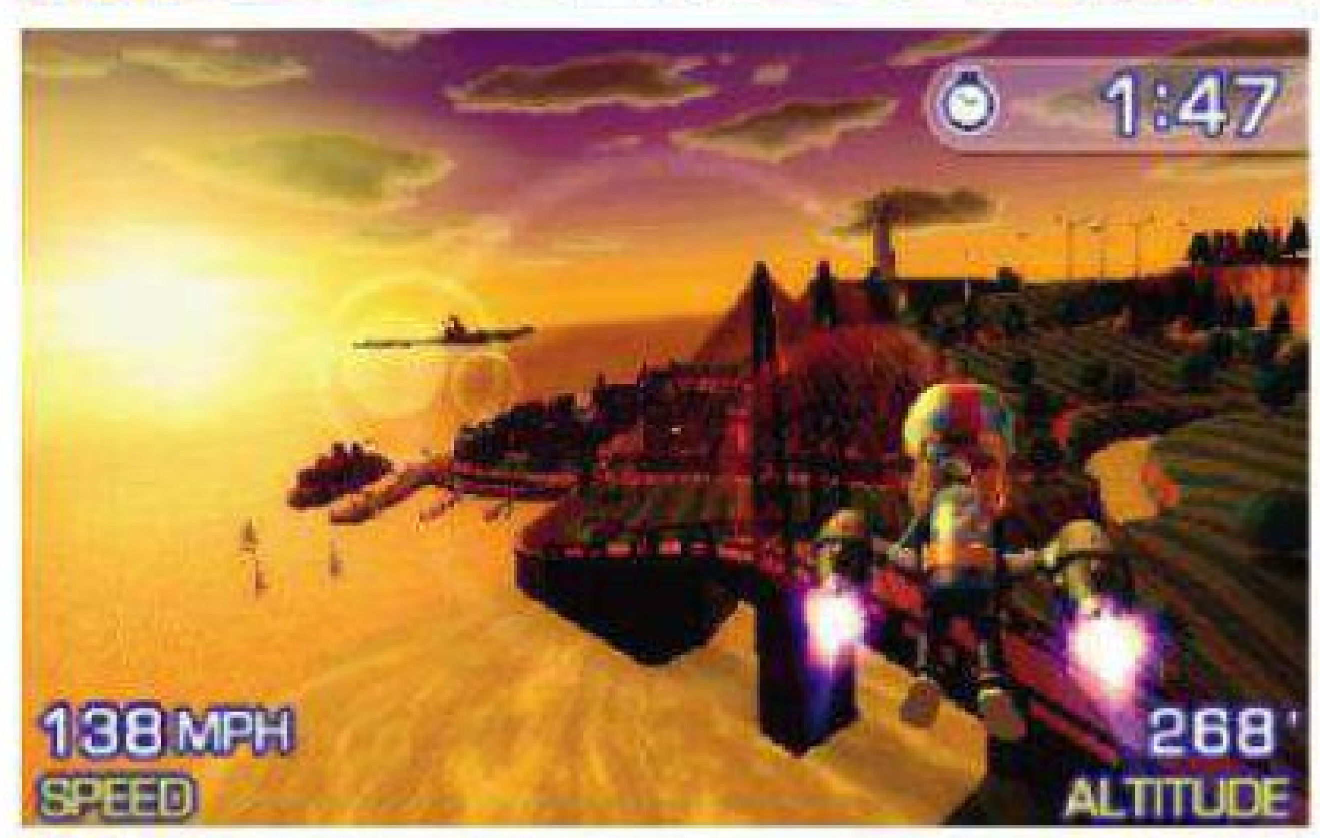
Nintendo's fantasy of non-odorous pet ownership is a perfect choice for 3DS. The sense of space created by the 3D effect heightens the joy of watching your pet come bounding giddily towards you. The front-facing camera will cause your furry chum to recognise you, and even mimic movements such as a head tilt. Just don't get so immersed in the fantasy that an impromptu game of fetch causes you to inadvertently fling your 3DS across the room.

PILOTWINGS RESORT

PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

In a rare example of 3D actually enhancing gameplay, the depth of field in *PilotWings Resort* makes hang gliding, biplane flying and jetpack riding through floating rings a far more precise exercise. The breezy island backdrop serves as a calming agent during the game's more punishing landing-strip challenges.

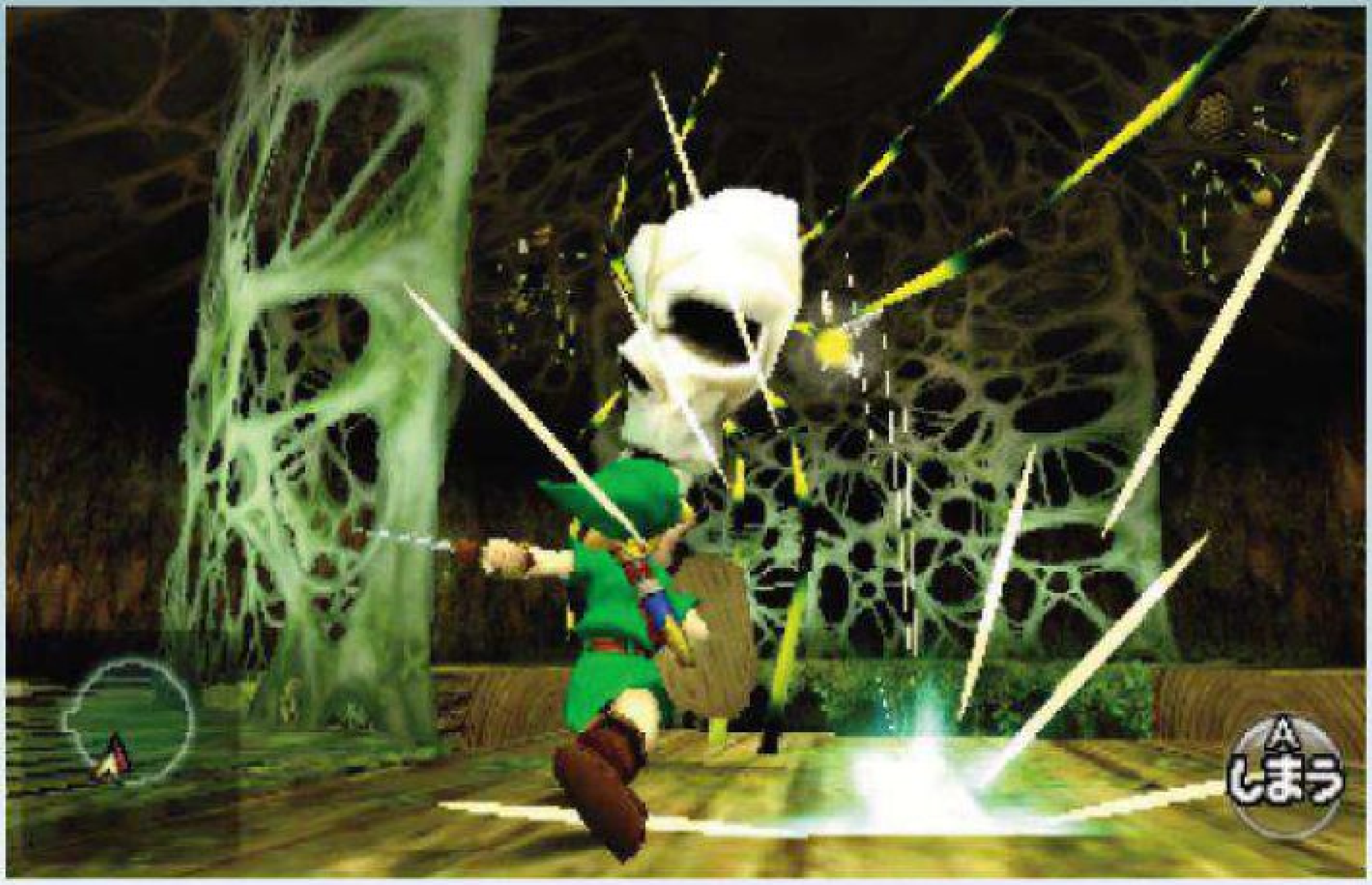




THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME 3D

PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

It would take a pile of hyperbole at least as tall as the Deku Tree itself to adequately express how much 3D adds to the experience of *Ocarina Of Time*. The magic is in the small touches – the way the ethereal particles gently drifting down in Kokiri forest brush past as you run; the way the camera swoops past the jutting corner of a treasure chest when you crack it open; the way the map you've just discovered rotates above the chest as if you could pluck it from inside the display with your fingers. The 3D simply italicises the richness of imagination that's existed in the game all along.



KID ICARUS UPRISING

PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



Uprising... geddit? While the action rises up skyward on Pit's flapping wings, the game makes a solid impression with the *Sin & Punishment*-style rail shooting it allows you to do once you're airborne. While the action itself may be elegantly straightforward, the controls are clumsy, with multitasking – anchoring the device, controlling Pit with the analogue circle pad and firing with the left shoulder button – driving your left hand silly. Flicking the stylus with your right hand to look and target feels intuitive, but the awkward input scheme provides a niggling distraction that's hard to shake. Left-handed players are likely to stage a far more literal uprising.

RESIDENT EVIL: THE MERCENARIES 3D

PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

The Mercenaries 3D is difficult to categorise. Not because of the shrills about its repackaging – Mercs may be a bonus mode, but it's one of the very best, and a new persistent structure can only make it better. It's the control setup. Modern *Resident Evil*'s tank movements are just about workable on consoles, but squeezed on to 3DS are less comfortable. The analogue nub can't match two sticks, so aiming is sluggish and fiddly in crowds. *Mercenaries 3D* crudely compensates by making Los Ganados less aggressive up close, at least initially.

Yet *Mercenaries* is ultimately too good to be swallowed by awkwardness: kill combos rack up, time bonuses smash, and crowds keep on coming. The 3D is used for rare flourishes, such as foregrounding a rifle's sight during headshots, but otherwise the effect is subtle to the point of being flat. Luckily, *Mercenaries* has near-*Resi 5* detail in its characters and environments, so while it isn't the most spectacular use of the 3DS's headline ability, it is beautiful. Add levelling and character customisation, as well as online co-op, and *Mercs 3D* is the definitive package of this particular score chase. Cramped controls, a little ornery, but too great to ignore – sounds like *Resi* to us.



developed *Luigi's Mansion* to run in 3D with the aid of an add-on display, but the company decided that the liquid crystal components were too expensive for massmarket adoption. The prohibitive expense wasn't the only challenge; experiments with naked-eye 3D on Nintendo's Game Boy Advance SP revealed an additional technical hurdle.

"Making three-dimensional images that can be seen by the naked eye requires a special liquid crystal," Iwata explains. "So we tested it out by putting it in the Game Boy Advance SP. But the resolution of LCD was low then, so it didn't look that great and it never made it to being a product... The stereoscopic effect wasn't very sharp."

It's only fitting that Nintendo's quest to realise its 3D aspirations has resembled an R&D department chasing a princess who forever seemed to be tucked away in another castle. Until there she was, at long last, beautiful to behold.

THE UNIQUE EXPERIENCE OF GLASSES-FREE 3D WILL BE A KEY DIFFERENTIATOR IN THE UPCOMING BATTLE WITH SONY'S NGP, BUT WILL IT BE ENOUGH TO RECLAIM MARKET SHARE?

When you peer into the widescreen 3DS LCD display for the first time, the immediacy of the depth effect catches you off guard. The time we've spent willing three-dimensional shapes to emerge from Magic Eye books and posters has blunted our confidence. We've stared deep into psychedelic stereograms, afraid to blink, as if trying to bend a spoon with our mind.

Take away the reassuring 'Dumbo feather' of polarised glasses, and we expect to have to work for our 3D. We come to the 3DS ready to squint and strain and focus or perhaps relax our focus just so, in order to trigger the effect. We pick up a 3DS knowing that no glasses are required, yet few have paused to appreciate the psychological impact of there being no effort required either.

In his GDC 2010 keynote, *Civilization* developer **Sid Meier** described gameplay as a psychological experience, stressing the fact "you almost can't reward players enough". If you want to be a successful game developer, you must figure out creative ways to, at every turn, make the player feel exceptional. The player's ability to appreciate the 3D effect on Nintendo's 3DS is a dazzling example of a piece of gaming hardware using technology itself to strum this potent psychological chord.

While the hardware's autostereoscopic 3D pushes display technology into the future, the device's streamlined networking functionality tries desperately to catch up to the present. Just as a Kindle will automatically update wirelessly when a new issue of a newspaper to which you're subscribed becomes available, 3DS's SpotPass feature will automatically pull down software updates over participating Wi-Fi networks, even when the device is in sleep mode. And, just as several players can huddle around an iPad game of Scrabble and use their iPhones as tile racks, 3DS's StreetPass feature opens up possibilities for novel interactions between 3DSes in the wild.

The hardware contains three cameras in total – one inner and two outer. The inner camera lets you snap your own portrait for use in Mii creation as well as bundled-in software such as *Face Raiders*, which wraps your likeness around a hovering sphere and twists it into funny expressions while you fire tiny balls at yourself. The two outer cameras let you take 3D photos, although the shots we took at the Amsterdam preview event looked quite grainy. The results will improve outdoors, obviously.

With 3DS retail prices hovering just north of £200 – a pricepoint seasoned observers had expected – the hardware stands apart from previous DS configurations on cost alone. Importantly, a 3DS will cost less than an NGP, but the unique experience of glasses-free 3D will be the key differentiator in the upcoming battle with Sony's unit. Will it be enough to reclaim market share being lost to iOS and Android smartphones? That will chiefly be an issue of upcoming software. Fortunately for Nintendo, it has a fairly respectable record in that department.





Shinji Enomoto and Naoya Hatsumi, currently working on *Pro Evo 3D*, address the media in Amsterdam (top). The 3DS hardware gets the red carpet treatment (above)

STEEL DIVER

PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



If you ever wondered what happened to the DS submarine demo from 2004's E3, here you go. Use the stylus to adjust your sub's pitch, depth and speed while navigating sidescrolling underwater locations, firing torpedoes at hostile subs. Could very well be a sleeper hit when it surfaces in late March.

PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 2011 3D

PUBLISHER: **KONAMI** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

Without a *FIFA* to square off against at the 3DS launch, Konami's *PES* franchise has a chance to score some new fans. The dynamic addition of Player's View lets players shift into an over-the-shoulder *Resident Evil 4* perspective, gaining a dynamic sense of the action. The idea may bring to mind similarly inspired, Mode 7-driven SNES football games, but the effect works better here.



COMBAT OF GIANTS: DINOSAURS 3D

PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



Such bitter irony that Ubisoft's dinosaur fighting game is one of the most under-evolved 3DS titles we've had a chance to play. Combat involves mashing a single button repeatedly until a giant arrow tells you to dodge. Then, once you've finished off your opponent, you get to crawl through an empty jungle in search of your next opponent. No wonder these fearsome dullards are extinct.

SUPER MONKEY BALL 3D

PUBLISHER: **SEGA** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

***SMB3D*'s suspended, round-ended geometry seems built for 3DS. There's a palpable rush as your ball careens down a ramp, the tile patterns and bananas whizzing past your focal point. The tilt controls are a hash: though subtle, it's impossible to keep the 3D effect focused while using them, and trying to move your head in tandem with the hardware is a messy business. With normal controls, this is familiar territory that, though fun, will surprise no one – even though the facelift works wonders.**



ASPHALT 3D: NITRO RACING

PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** DEVELOPER: **GAMELOFT**



A physics-light arcade racer, *Asphalt 3D* is about as inspired as its name. There's at least a sensation of speed: the low-res barriers and polygonal skyscrapers whip by, while a nitro-boosting mechanic ensures you rarely notice how basic they look. The 3D effect isn't especially pronounced at high speeds, and the lame crash camera is an opportunity missed. Asphalt moves fast, but that's all: it's otherwise floaty, dull, and awkward to control. Next to *Ridge Racer*, however, it doesn't even move very fast.

LEGO STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS

PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS** DEVELOPER: **TELLTALE GAMES**



Whatever else there is to say about the Lego games, there's no denying the art direction is first class. One of the most delightful 3DS effects thus far is *The Clone Wars*' blocky worlds, every brick of which seems solid. As a game, it doesn't reinvent the Lego template, but as minor spectacle, with its great depth-of-field and near-tangible building blocks, *The Clone Wars* uses 3DS to great effect.

FACE RAIDERS

PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



One of the silliest, most enjoyable 3DS experiences we've tried to date comes bundled with the unit itself. Take a picture of yourself using the hardware's forward-facing camera and then watch the image come to life, winking, sneering, bobbing and weaving about as you fire little rubber balls at it. The overall objective? Kill your face before it gets close enough to leave a red smooch mark on you, of course.

PERMADEPTH

GOING BEYOND THE THIRD DIMENSION WITH NINTENDO'S HEAD OF EUROPEAN MARKETING



"WE'VE NEVER SEEN ANY LINK BETWEEN GROWTH IN THE MOBILE GAMING MARKET AND DECREASE IN THE NORMAL SOFTWARE MARKET. IT'S TWO DIFFERENT MARKETS"

Nintendo's 3DS press event in Amsterdam has come to a close, and Nintendo of Europe's managing director of marketing and PR, **Laurent Fischer**, is ready to discuss the company's new 3D handheld, challenge the notion of physical media's imminent obsolescence, and respond to Sony's NGP gate-crashing of the next-gen handheld party.

Nintendo has touted the networking capabilities of the 3DS hardware and the creative ways in which it interacts with neighbouring 3DS units, but will it also communicate with a Wii console in the home?
We're here focused on the handheld side. Nintendo 3DS is the new proposal for the handheld side and that's where our key focus is. The common line is still that we're trying to offer a unique experience. At the end of the day, that's our motto. If we're not able to offer a unique experience to the people, what will happen is they'll opt for doing something else.

So a 3DS won't 'speak' to a Wii.
As of now, we're not communicating about that. The 3DS's SpotPass technology allows updates and additional content to be sent to the device via Wi-Fi hotspots, even while it's in sleep mode.

Presumably this connectivity also functions for Nintendo as an anti-piracy solution, allowing for the transmission of on-the-go security updates.
SpotPass is made to deliver content to a console. I think that's really the core target. Just to close the case on anti-piracy, of course for us it's very important and has to be placed as a necessary measure, but there's nothing that we're communicating around that specific anti-piracy topic. To come back to SpotPass, it's really just a tool to enable people to get content in a smooth way. That's really the concept.

Nintendo is offering lots of incentives to keep your 3DS with you at all times, through pedometer-driven virtual currency rewards, StreetPass, etc. What are the challenges of influencing consumer behaviour in this way when your device lacks the broad functionality of, say, Apple's iPhone?
All we can do is set up a tool. Each one of our consoles is a tool, which has technical abilities. And in general the technical abilities that we have are hidden behind a smooth interface. To us, the way developers work around our tool will be one entry point. And SpotPass being able to deliver content to people on the go will be another one. If you know what's happening in Japan with the DS, you know that if you go to McDonald's you can get access to the menu on the DS. You can go to the train station and pull up the train map and timetable on your DS. These are the kinds of things that have enhanced the DS experience in Japan. In the future, you'll find more and more reasons to carry around your 3DS.

How does Nintendo decide which thirdparty developers are afforded the opportunity to release titles in conjunction with the 3DS launch and which ones must wait until later in the launch window to bring their software to market?
Basically, there is no real decision made. Everyone received the tools. You have teams that work at different speeds. Everyone is part of the planning and, at the end of the day, it's a matter of 'I'm there and I'm meeting the technical requirements and then I can find the project planning slot'. There's no low priority, high priority, low priority. It would not be publisher-friendly to have that kind of behaviour. Here at today's Amsterdam press event we have many, many different publishers for the lineup. Some of them will be there on day one, some of them will be in the launch window. It's up to them to ask themselves if it's better to be there on day one or later. It's up to everyone to move along their own path with their own objectives.



Kid Icarus Uprising boasts some of the best 3DS visuals, particularly in its rail-shooting sequences. You control Pit with the analogue pad, using the shoulder button to fire

Apple's App Store has set the standard for ease of use in terms of on-the-go downloads. Will Nintendo's 3DS eShop offer a more seamless experience for acquiring digital content than was the case with DSi?
Regardless of the topic, we never act or plan or work based on reaction to competition. Our focus is always to find the unique way and make sure that we are able to offer that unique experience.

Yet you can always learn from competitors, can't you?
Of course we can learn, I'm not denying that. For example, we've simplified how friend codes are used on the device. It's not related to digital downloads, but talking about the ability to connect people together, we've learned, adjusted and changed to a new way to do it. With Nintendo's eShop, for example, we're committed to working in that direction. But, as of now, we're not communicating too much about features. It's still something we're working on. We'll communicate much more about content and how it's going to work as we get closer to launch.

Will it feel like the DSi shop?
It has been designed specifically to use the Nintendo 3DS, so it's going to be a new experience.

Apple has pushed software pricepoint expectation to an incredibly low level – what is Nintendo's view on that trend in terms of its own digital pricing structures?
We have been very clearly communicating for a long time that the packaged-software or retail market is the one that's going to drive the mass market. Even so, everyone



If it has a camera, it has to have a bit of the old augmented reality. Nintendo's dragon-based 3DS demo hits the spot

pinpoints downloadable games for different reasons. First of all, not all consumers are purchasing downloadable content. Second of all, the average transaction is very low, as you pointed out. At the end of the day, we have never seen any link between growth in the mobile gaming market and decrease in the normal software market. It's two different markets, two different topics. Everybody was talking about that, but we couldn't find any evidence of those two markets being linked together.

Obviously Nintendo doesn't see physical media becoming obsolete anytime soon.

It's the users that decide it. Every time we have a new technology or trend coming in, every time people say: "That's the new expectation. It'll be the mass market in one, maybe two or three years." You can bet it's always wrong. Sometimes it's quicker than anyone expected, sometimes it's dead before we can even talk further about it, and sometimes it is five or ten years later than anyone planned. None of us can tell that. People who talk about the end of physical media don't share the same daily reality as most consumers.

To what extent does Sony's NGP announcement steal limelight away from 3DS's momentum during this critical pre-launch phase?

Basically my short-term goal is to make sure as many people as possible try Nintendo 3DS. It's not that we're denying competition. The thing is, we can't plan how we should respond to the competition because the competition is mainly limited to the hardware. Every day we will find new competition. Taking a broader view, we're competing with any kind of entertainment. You go to the cinema, whatever. We only have limited time and money to allocate to entertainment. Videogames are no longer unique as interactive entertainment – even blogs and YouTube provide interactivity. So Nintendo, and videogames generally, have to come back to that unique experience, that unique surprise, that makes sure people return to us. If we fail to do that, consumers will go somewhere else.



3DS improves on its predecessor's design via, among other additions, an analogue pad and a telescopic stylus. With a modest battery life of up to five hours, the device's charging dock will get plenty of use. The iridescent aqua-blue body colour option? A matter of taste, obviously

PUBLISHER: **TECMO KOEI** DEVELOPER: **TEAM NINJA**







In *Dead Or Alive Dimensions*, Team Ninja bottles the lightning that's made *DOA* such a long-lived brand on consoles, picking and choosing elements from the series' legacy that best show off Nintendo's new platform.

The backdrops, many ripped from *DOA4*, with destructible scenery and vertiginous freefalls, ration the effect of 3D to make it valuable and affecting without degenerating into monotony or overkill. The camera feels freer than it has before, stalking the action and framing finishers in slow-motion glory, driving home the 3D effect.

Dial down the 3D and you're still left with the most satisfying, faithful translation of a fighting series to handheld yet. Crucially, the characters – from beginner's favourite Jann Lee to acquired taste Lei Fang – feel and fight exactly as they should. Trickier fighters like Zack even show signs of worthwhile tweaking, the rough edges of his stuttering attacks smoothed to keep things flowing and board up harsh counterattack windows.

The point of contention is likely to be the controls. The D-pad is the weapon of choice for any beat 'em up veteran and the awkwardness of its position on the 3DS hardware becomes quickly apparent. Touchscreen input will be embraced by newcomers (tap a command with the stylus and your character does the rest), but it's a concession to accessibility that may be the game's undoing if it interferes with the overall balance of versus play.

Aesthetic beauty and control concerns aside, the real crux of *DOAD* will be its harnessing of 3DS's features, which may finally add that long-missing dimension to the fighting genre: attractive, portable connectivity.

DEAD OR ALIVE V

MASTER NINJA



Yosuke Hayashi (left), *Dead Or Alive Dimensions*' producer and heir to Tomonobu Itagaki's throne, talks about the more intimate nature of 3DS and what it means for the future of versus gaming.

How did you settle on *DOAD* as your first 3DS title?
Actually, before we knew about 3DS we were planning a handheld *DOA* – we felt there was still a way for Team Ninja to develop a portable game in a different way. With 3DS's communication, its matching system, it really fits our need and intention.

How well does 3DS support a versus gaming experience?
Most importantly it's portable – people can play face-to-face in local play. Another thing is StreetPass – people playing online brings a new level of enjoyment. Indirectly, people can exchange data. For example, if you play a lot, a random CPU can generate your stats, and predict your character's future.

With its face-to-face play, is 3DS set to harm arcade gaming in Japan?
I think 3DS can provide the same kind of experience that arcades can. For arcades we have to go to the venue to play, but with 3DS we can bring it with us. Arcades aren't going to disappear, but an interesting example of what's happening in Japan right now is that a lot of elderly people, over 60s, are gathering in the arcades to play betting games. Generation by generation, the meaning of arcades is changing.

How does 3DS add to your sense of physicality in a fighting game?
It's the difference between a standard movie and a 3D movie. Take as an example our characters Kasumi and Ayane – you'll feel they exist, they're real breathing characters.

Interesting you only mention the girls...
For everybody – maybe even you – there's a desire to see a girl on 3DS. I think that's one desire people have. Maybe me, too...

YOSHI'S STORY

We speak to **Yoshinori Ono** (right), the producer of *Super Street Fighter IV 3D*, about his little fireball problem.

When you think *Street Fighter*, don't you think arcade sticks and big screens?
Arcade sticks are for the dedicated gamers, the real fighters. With 3DS, instead of aiming for those at the very top of this pyramid of players, we want to get as many as possible, make it accessible – that's why you have the touchscreen, and you can customise it to put all the combos you want on there.

What does being 'accessible' mean?
I'm getting old – it's not as easy to pull out that hadouken as it used to be. When I think of players getting older and the moves getting harder, that's a sad thing. I mean: hadouken! That's a great thing to do to your friend, and I used to do it all the time, but now I can barely manage one.

So, anyway, this all leads me to this idea that being accessible is just about new players or casual players – it's not. We want back all these people that were players at the time and now don't play for whatever reason. Not just that, we want to give them back the feeling of playing at that time – in the arcade with their friends, in the house with their brother, wherever. If the series has an origin, an essence, it's there.

"THE FEELING I HAVE WITH 3DS IS THE SAME AS WHEN THE DREAMCAST CAME OUT – AS A DEVELOPER, THESE MACHINES ARE SO EXCITING. WE'RE FASCINATED BY IT"

As a developer, why 3DS?
First, we are in Nintendo country. Second, the feeling I have with 3DS is the same as when the Dreamcast came out – as a developer, I mean, these machines are so exciting. We're fascinated by it at Capcom, and diving into the innards at the moment, but you just know there's so much more there to unlock; it's got more to give.



S STREET FIGHTER

SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV 3D

PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



Ken has a punchable face, and in 3D, it's even more true. *SSFIV*'s standard view uses 3D to distinguish the fighters from the backgrounds, but during Ultras and Supers gets more enthusiastic, with the camera zooming into and around the character models. More of a curio is the 'Dynamic View' over-the-shoulder camera. *SSFIV3D* has all the content you'd expect, including online battling and bonuses such as StreetPass figurine-battling. Destined to be the big thirdparty launch hit.

READY... SET...

THIRDPARTY DEVELOPMENT TAKES ON GAMING'S THIRD DIMENSION



While his company fine-tunes an F1 3DS game, **Rod Cousens** (above), Codemasters CEO and one of the UK's longest-serving game industry veterans, talks competition in the next generation of handhelds and sheds light on the challenges of thirdparty development.

As a content creator, what do you make of 3DS's potential?
Nintendo understands international distribution. They were the first hardware vendor to do more than 100 million machines on one platform, with the Game Boy. This is a very interesting hardware introduction, and I think it will give the industry a much-needed boost. I think for a global distribution device with some interesting technology – the 3D perspective – and a catalogue of products with such high-profile awareness to consumers, I expect it to be huge.

Nintendo has described the console as a far more technologically advanced piece of hardware than its DSi predecessor. When your studios got their hands on the development kit, did you find that to be accurate?
Yeah, I think Nintendo always challenges the creativity of the content developers, and I think this is no exception. I think we're going to see some pretty innovative stuff from the firstparties that will drive the rest of us forwards as we get our thinking caps on and get to understand the architecture.

Nintendo is positioning the device to be a tethered part of your day, one of the things that you cram into your pocket as you walk out of the door.
It's not intrusive, you can snack on it. I think the compelling and addictive nature of the content has paid attention to *Angry Birds* and stuff like that. Nintendo will have those kinds of experiences within their own firstparty offering.

Does a thirdparty publisher's relationship with Nintendo affect how early in the launch window it's able to get its product to market? And, if so, how much of a competitive advantage does it really provide to be first off the mark?
I've been in games for 30 years and it's never changed in that regard. You grow up knowing that's what it is and you operate within the confines of that. I do think there's a first-out advantage, but that's very quickly evaporated. If you're out there you can get a bigger market share of a smaller category, but it's very, very quickly coming under pressure from a multitude of offerings. One challenge for Nintendo will be the limited number of applications available at first. Historically, Nintendo's always fought against junk software – to the extent that they've tried to control it. I don't think they can control that any longer, and if you contemplate a market which is heavily weighted to firstparties in Nintendo, which has always been the case, where the firstparty takes 60 to 65 per cent of the market and the thirdparties have to compete for the rest, you could have a business model that builds into it a wastage factor that may make it challenging for the thirdparties. The answer to that is you have to have compelling content, content which differentiates itself.



To encourage you to keep your 3DS with you at all times, Activity Log uses the pedometer to track your steps. Soon, you'll know how many miles you log between fridge and sofa

Speaking of differentiating, how do you expect Sony to position its NGP handheld in relation to 3DS?
Sony will clearly take the high ground in terms of the technological positioning, insomuch as you've got a portable device which is allegedly as powerful as the PS3. Sony has to decide if it's targeting the tablet market with the NGP, or whether it's targeting the portable market in the context that you're up against the 3DS. I've got to say, measuring it against the latter, Nintendo have the high ground and are a very formidable competitor. When I was at CES, there were 20 or more tablets out there, and the tablet that everyone wanted was the iPad. I don't think it's easy to go up against that, so I think it's a very difficult positioning proposition for Sony.

"HISTORICALLY, NINTENDO'S ALWAYS FOUGHT AGAINST JUNK SOFTWARE – TO THE EXTENT THAT THEY'VE TRIED TO CONTROL IT. I DON'T THINK THEY CAN ANY LONGER"



Marquee Nintendo franchises will drive adoption of 3DS, and once more make success trickier for thirdparties. A traditional Mario game hasn't yet been announced – this shot shows an element of 3DS's user interface – but all eyes will be on E3

The story of this new handheld generation appears to be the Wii-PS3 dichotomy all over again – the spec-heavy technological marvel against the intriguing, family-friendly oddity.
If you ask me as a content creator where I view the biggest risk in creating content for portable devices, I'd probably sway towards 3DS, and take a wait-and-see attitude towards the NGP.

INCOMING MORE SLICES OF THE 3DS CATALOGUE

ANIMAL CROSSING

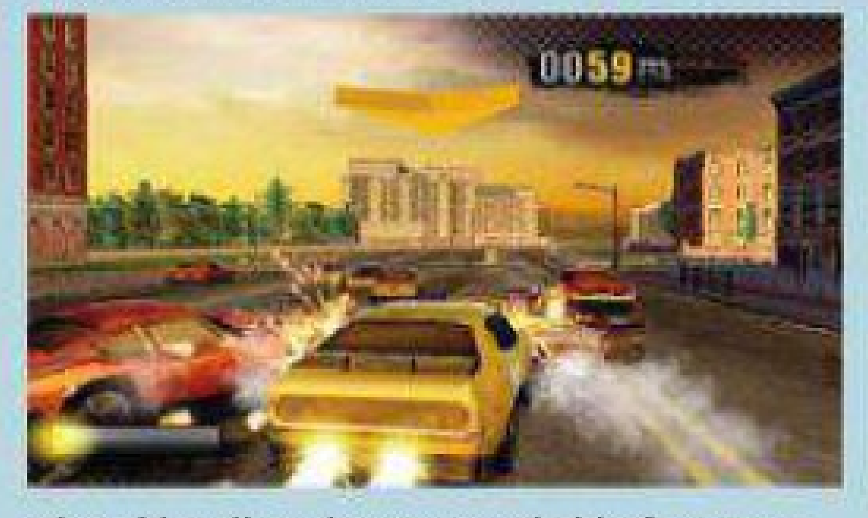
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



Some IPs never change, and *Animal Crossing* looks set to bring its little-big world of buying, selling, decorating and wandering to 3DS. What will the neighbours think when they see your 3D plums?

DRIVER: RENEGADE

PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



What video slivers have escaped Ubisoft suggest something closer to *Burnout* than a typical day in the shoes of Tanner. The racing game competition on 3DS is heating up right from the starting line

MADDEN NFL FOOTBALL

PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



Two screens and a stylus are a good tools for wannabe NFL tacticians. The implementation of *Madden*'s cinematic angles for game-changing, and backbreaking, plays should exploit 3DS suitably

MARIO KART

PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



We've waited a long time for a new portable *Mario Kart* – and a worthy heir to the series' throne – and, finally, it's coming. The draw of a flaming-hot red shell takedown in 3D is undeniable

METAL GEAR SOLID: SNAKE EATER 3D

PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS**



Kojima once again ventures into Nintendo territory with an aged instalment in his series. And once again he suckers us with the silliest trailers and some of the best thirdparty visuals on the platform

MII PLAZA

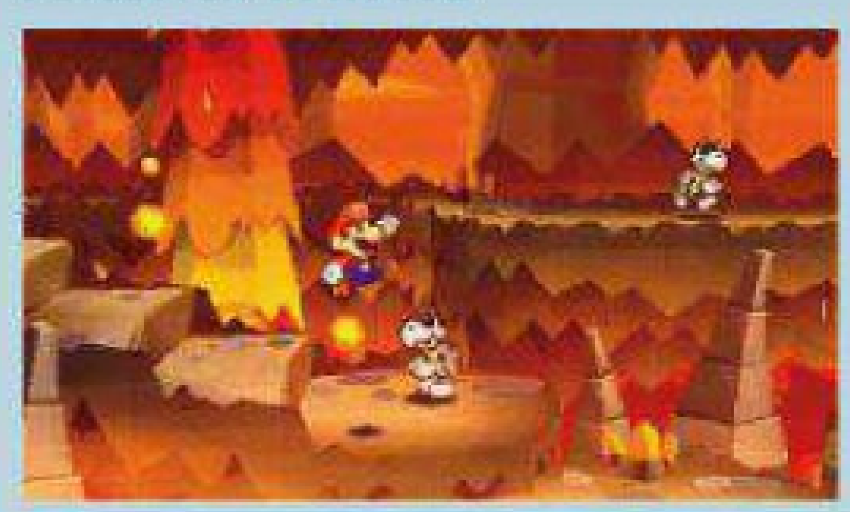
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



This built-in feature enhances the Mii experience with its StreetPass networking features. Next time you get home from a walk, you just might find some Mii stowaways loitering in your Mii Plaza

PAPER MARIO

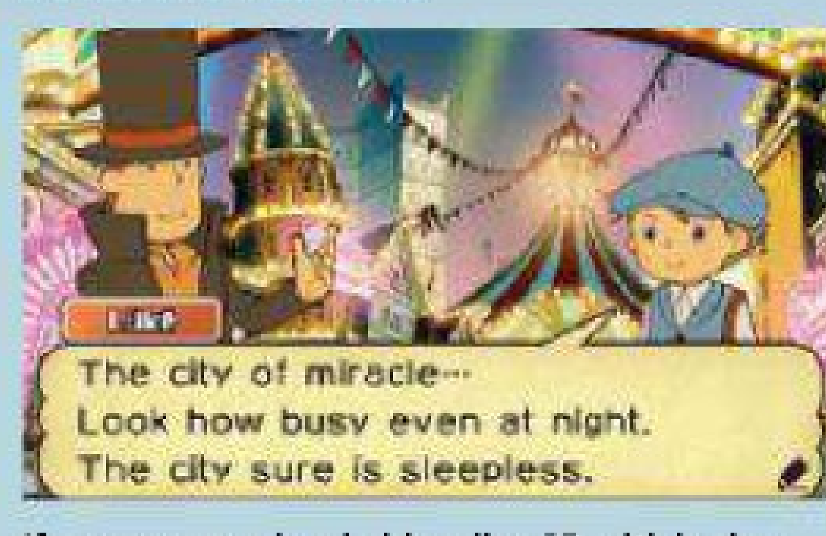
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



Mario's debut on new hardware has always been a standard-bearer, and *Paper Mario*'s crisp beauty looks set to be a snug fit with the 3D background distancing. We miss the wry humour of the series

PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE MASK OF MIRACLE

PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **LEVEL-5**



If anyone can mix mind-bending 3D with brain-teasing puzzles, it's Layton. The real challenge will be adding a new dimension to a gameplay mould that hasn't yet had cause to change

PUZZLE BOBBLE UNIVERSE

PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **ARIKA**



Whether the flat, retro stylings of Taito's puzzle classic will make worthwhile use of 3D, and make for an attractive retail purchase, remains to be seen. One thing's guaranteed: bubbles will die

RESIDENT EVIL: REVELATIONS

PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



A series that's never managed to offer anything fresh to handheld devices. *Revelations* has inherited *RE4* and *5*'s thirdperson perspective with a firstperson aim thrown in for good measure

RIDGE RACER 3D

PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



Same old *Ridge Racer*, brand new blazing speed. The lower screen's function as map is perfect for watching your back, and the 3DS analogue pad will be the perfect fit for showy powersliding

SAMURAI WARRIORS: CHRONICLES

PUBLISHER: **TECMO KOEI**
DEVELOPER: **OMEGA FORCE**



For those who like hacking with their slashing, *Chronicles* looks like a commendable transfer of this series' uneven showdowns. A D-pad-controlled camera could be your biggest enemy, however

STAR FOX 64 3D

PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



McCloud barrel rolls on to 3DS with a faithful recreation of the series' N64 high-point for which the device's button layout is a match made in heaven. 3D was made for lasers and animal pilots

THE SIMS 3

PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **THE SIMS STUDIO**



The Sims have never fully found their groove in the portable market, but the new power of 3DS will at least provide the platform for EA's game of people management and voyeurism to shine

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON: SHADOW WARS

PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



'Isometric', 'turn-based' and '*Ghost Recon*' aren't the most likely combination, but the potential for *Advance Wars*-style thrills has us intrigued. With Julian Gollop at the helm, who wouldn't be?

TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL 3D

PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



Ubisoft largely picked adult titles for its 3DS blitz, and who better to lead the charge than old Sam Fisher? A remake of *Chaos Theory* has us rubbing our hands for some moody, broody, 3D sabotage

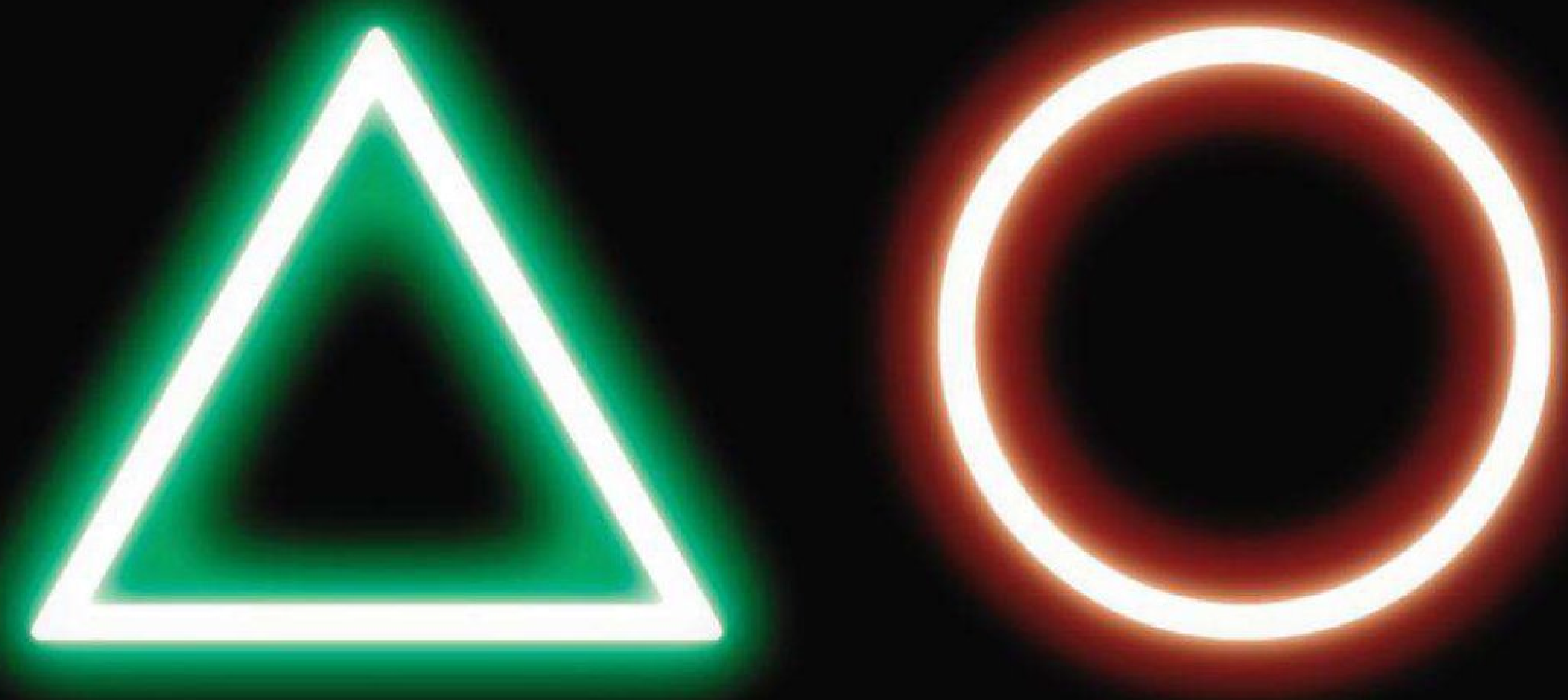
X □ FACTOR

PS Camp is the videogame industry's equivalent of The X Factor. Anyone who has ever had an idea for a videogame, no matter how old they are or what industry they work in, is invited to pitch it to **Masami Yamamoto**, Sony Japan's equivalent of scowling Simon Cowell. Successful applicants win the chance to work with Sony's development staff to see their idea realised and, in some cases, their fortunes made. Indeed, three of the first games to be made this way went on to sell a million copies apiece, generating income to rival X Factor winners.

The music talent show format is more than a useful analogy. In the early '90s, Sony president Norio Ohga, nervous at how dabbling in videogames could potentially tarnish the electronics giant's brand, placed the PlayStation project under the wing of Sony Music, a separate subsidiary. The move was significant to the success of the console, as Sony Music understood that creative talent requires nurturing in a way that the drier, tech-focused core part of the company didn't.

At that time, Sony Music ran a talent contest for amateur musicians dubbed 'Band Yaroze' (Yaroze means 'let's do it together'), with a record contract for the winner. As Sony Music staff began to move on to the PlayStation project, one suggested a similar idea for game designers, to encourage talent across Japan to pitch game ideas. In that moment, Game Yaroze was born.

"The response was hugely enthusiastic," explains Yamamoto, executive producer of product development at Sony Japan. "I think we received something like 1,000 projects in that first batch. From this, we selected 30 candidates and flew them to our old offices at Nakanosakaue in Tokyo where they



FIFTEEN YEARS AFTER LAUNCHING ITS NET YAROZE INITIATIVE FOR WANNABE GAME DESIGNERS, SONY JAPAN IS INSPIRING A NEW GENERATION TO CREATE SOFTWARE

worked with our internal staff to bring their ideas to life." The first wave of Yaroze releases, from 1996 to 1999, each of which took less than three years from inception to release, exceeded everyone's expectations, yielding games such as *Xi* (aka *Devil Dice*), *Dokodemo Issho* and *IQ* on PS1. "These were titles designed and developed by people who didn't have a single idea about how to make videogames. They sold a million copies apiece. To have three million-sellers out of our first try was, even from a business point of view, quite an accomplishment."

All of the designers from the first wave of Game Yaroze projects were subsequently offered jobs within Sony, many of whom still work at the company today. The project was so successful that it led to the release of the black Yaroze PlayStation, a consumer-focused development kit that allowed users to write their own games at home and share them across its network. While the original Game Yaroze project was focused on designers with good ideas, Net Yaroze, which came bundled with a copy of the 3D software Lightwave, existed to give wannabe artists and programmers a platform on which to cut their teeth. While there were no million-sellers from the project, many who work in the industry today found their way into game development via this unusual route.

In 1999, Sony was readying itself to launch the PlayStation's successor, a system with a vastly more complicated architecture. "No one without some experience in game development could possibly make anything on the PS2," explains Yamamoto. "There was no way it could be done. You need to be a development team, even a small one." As such, the Yaroze project was laid to rest, the era of talent-show development



"PEOPLE STILL SEND THEIR IDEAS IN ON PAPER, BUT WE ARE MORE INTERESTED IN GETTING TO KNOW THE PERSON WHO HAD THE IDEA"

seemingly outmoded by the march of technological progression.

Seven years later, however, with digital distribution catching fire, talent-show game development seemed, once again, to be a possibility. "PSN was the perfect means to deliver content cheaply, over high-performance infrastructures that were finally widely available," says Yamamoto. "So we thought it was the right occasion for us to restart a Yaroze programme." In 2006, Game Yaroze was resurrected, the name changed to PS Camp to widen the net for ideas to encompass other types of content for PlayStation 3, not necessarily limited to videogames. "Times are different," says Yamamoto. "We preferred to gather contestants' ideas from all over the country and make them available online on the PS3. It is not only about games but also services and new elements that you would not find in physical form in stores."

In the early days of Game Yaroze, development was a drawn-out affair, as candidates were taught the basics of game making. Nowadays, Sony's emphasis is on moving projects from start to completion in a far quicker way. "When we decided to restart the Yaroze programme in 2006, we knew that things had to change," says Yamamoto. "Even with a great idea, helping a newcomer work on that idea required a new approach. People who are alien to videogame development require time. It is perfectly understandable. But we can't wait three years for a game to roll out. So we worked on that problem and the games that were developed from the 2006 initiative required far less time: about seven months.

"To achieve that, a winning candidate has to get some help. So we looked outside the company in search of thirdparty developers who would like to work with us. We bring the idea and they provide the knowhow and muscles to translate that into a videogame. That way, we were able to have releases constantly."

One thing that hasn't changed since the early days of Game Yaroze is the way in which potential projects are selected. "People still send their ideas in on paper," explains Yamamoto. "But you can't always get everything by just reading something. We are more interested in getting to know the person who had the idea. So we meet them and we have them present their idea live. The way the person is able to explain their idea has quite an important role in our final decision. It is not all just about the idea. If we feel someone has a great attitude, interesting ideas and potential, that can go a long way.

"The second stage of the process involves calling back those candidates, around 30, who successfully passed our first round of selection. They come to our offices and work on their idea. It starts with refining their idea and reducing the design document to a single page. It evolves to ten pages, and later more, as candidates are given the possibility to expand and develop their initial idea further. Then, after three months, we have them compete again."

At this advanced stage of the selection process, each game idea is scored on nine secret criteria, the idea being that the games with the highest scores move forward into production. "Of course, in the end I have the final word," says Yamamoto. "We can take the projects that ended with the highest score, but sometimes you want something that brings something new and potentially interesting – something that does not exist yet."

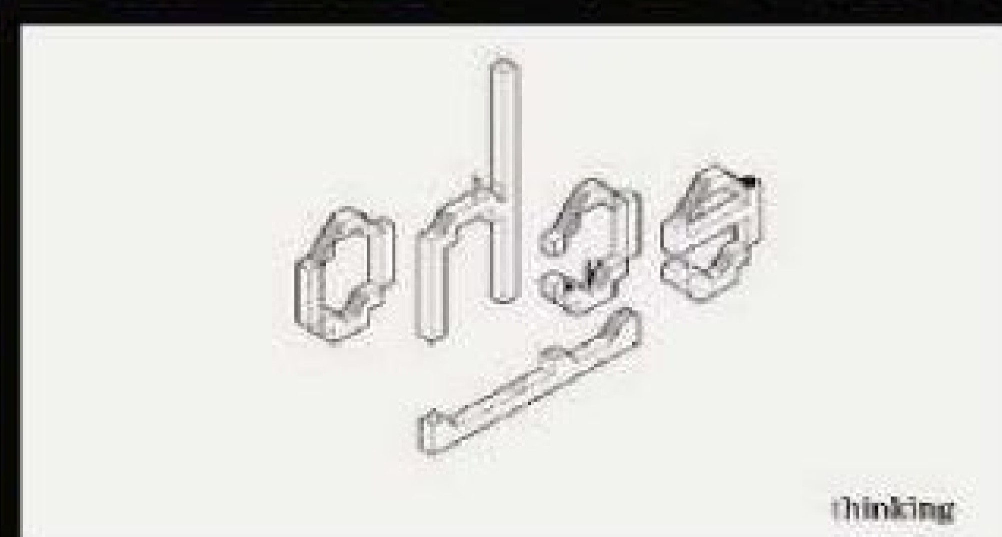
Even once a game makes it past this stage in the process, success is not assured. "The real final word comes from the top," says Yamamoto. "A winning idea can get rejected if it does not answer the company's needs or is seen as too original!" Indeed, of those games that made it through the knockout round, only about 30 per cent have reached the PSN store, where there are currently nine games representing the PS Camp initiative.

One game that did make it through the selection process was the PSP title *Patchwork Heroes*, released in early 2010. **Yuki Ikeda** was working at a non-game-related company when he first saw the









Masami Yamamoto (above) is the Sony Computer Entertainment executive producer in charge of the PS Camp initiative, which sees newcomers work under Sony, or thirdparty, supervision. PS Camp games published to date encompass a variety of themes, and include the Move-enabled *Beat Sketcher* (top right), *Tokyo Jungle* (above centre) and the puzzle-based *Echochrome* series

advert inviting prospective game designers to pitch ideas to Sony. "When I saw the advertisement I immediately talked to two of my colleagues," he explains. "I love videogames, and it's a very appealing industry to me. This was a unique opportunity, even if we did come from an industry that is totally different. The three of us decided to pitch together, as a team, and were lucky enough to be selected to develop our idea into a game."

One of those colleagues was **Seiichi Terashima**, who went on to become the artist on *Patchwork Heroes*. "I'll be honest, I never played any videogames prior to our participation in the audition," he explains. "At the same time, the job I was doing at the time was not something I saw as a long-term career, so I saw the PS Camp initiative as an opportunity to change and try something new."

After the three men pitched their game, Sony took such a long time to reply that they say they almost forgot about it. "We were wondering if there was any chance we could be selected," says Terashima. "We had no idea. So we were almost messing about in our decision to take part in the programme. I mean, there was the feeling that it would be fantastic if our game was selected, but if it wasn't, we still all had our current jobs to fall back on. At that time, I was visiting China many times for my work. I almost forgot about the audition, I was so busy."

For **Tomokazu Ohki**, a graphic designer who recently had his idea for a PS Move game (yet to be given a title) selected via the PS Camp initiative, there was more at stake: "When I applied for the audition I was at a very important moment in my life. I was starting to search for my first job. It is hard to think of a videogame audition when you are taking interviews left, right and centre and being turned down. I was becoming quite well-trained in the art of interviews and presentation when I was called to present my idea to Sony. I was surprised that the interview was primarily concerned with what I thought was fun. It did not feel like a test, in comparison to the other companies I visited. That said, auditioning for the PS Camp programme while also trying to find a job for myself was a tough time for me, so when the call came through, it was a huge relief."

Despite his eagerness to try something new, for Terashima the switch to the game industry was intimidating. "Before coming to Sony, I had very little experience with computers. I was an old-school artist so I was concerned – no, terrified. I was wondering if such a high-tech industry was the place for me. I had the feeling that I was going to be able to bring my own skills and creativity, but the technology factor was like a thick wall to me. As we joined SCE, I realised that there was indeed a lot of tech involved but people were very kind and I was able to

PS Camp game *Patchwork Heroes* (below) was created by a team including (from near right) Kenta Nakatsuka, Seiichi Terashima and Yuki Ikeda, with assistance from *Tenchu 2* studio Acquire







start with things that I could comprehend, and build and grow from that."

For the *Patchwork Heroes* team, settling on the final design for their game was a long, drawn-out process. "You have no idea how much time we spent on tweaking designs before settling on *Patchwork Heroes*," says Ikeda. "I remember we were often told to go with one idea as someone thought it was cool, but we often ended up scrapping it as we felt it was not fun enough. During that long year and a half, we managed to develop creative thinking that is quite precious for us today. Bit by bit, we started to understand what we wanted to do and how. We are now at a stage where we can understand what can become a game, what can't, or what might with more work. I believe we won't spend as much time on future projects, as we have a much better understanding of the process."

One interesting aspect of this influx of talent into Sony from other industries is the fresh eyes with which these teams are able to view the way the game industry works, perhaps perceiving flaws overlooked by those who are used to its traditions. "The biggest shock for me was seeing how long it takes to make a game," explains Ikeda. "Most of the time, teams in general develop a game and don't reuse anything for the following project, starting again from scratch. I feel there is a waste here. I see the west as being more efficient in reusing materials and developing an engine that can free you from rebuilding most of the things you need every time you start again. I'm very interested to read stories about small teams of around five people who were able to develop a game thanks to a given engine. I feel this is one thing the Japanese videogame industry should focus on."

Ohki agrees: "It takes a lot of time before a project is accepted, and even longer before it turns into a game. We're talking years. When I was a freelancer, the longest I would spend on a single project wouldn't exceed a month. Most of the time I'd work on something for days,

WHEN GOOD IDEAS AREN'T ENOUGH

Amateur game designers fall prey to the same pressures that buffet professional projects, with those ideas that are too innovative or technologically ambitious falling by the wayside. "Last October, following the release of the PS Move controller, there was a terrific idea for a sandcastle-building game," says Yamamoto. "We even got to the prototype level. But to deliver a perfect sand effect with the current hardware, we realised we would not be able to get the very realistic appearance of sand that we wanted. We had to drop the project as it was taking too much time already. There were great physics with water and sand, plus you had some RTS-like components as well in attacking others' castles while protecting yours. I really thought it was an interesting idea for both kids and parents to have fun together. But, again, we don't have sufficient hardware power today."



not weeks. At Sony I've ended up working on very long projects and I always think about ways to shorten the time spent on developing content."

Despite the audition winners' concerns over project length, PS Camp teams are largely spared concerns over the commercial viability of their ideas. "It's hard not to look at sales figures, especially from a team perspective," says Ikeda. "But we are all aware that people at SCE handle those issues. When we first started work, I thought Sony would tell us when our projects were going nowhere in terms of commercial objectives, and that, if needed, they would stop the development. So we kept working on our ideas without paying too much attention to the commercial issue."

Terashima agrees: "There was no need to feel pressured. But in anything you do, you want to be successful. I think it is very natural. So commercial considerations are not a pressure but a source of motivation. That said, when I read Amazon's reviews, I feel a bit depressed when I receive harsh criticism on design elements that I worked on."

PS Camp may be unique in its approach, but it is hardly the only way for an aspiring game designer to make his or her way into the industry. "We live in a time when people, even at an individual level, can develop lots of things on their own," says Yamamoto. "Look at the iPhone 4, for example. I think times have changed. It is not necessarily about gathering ideas and working together to make them into products. People can make games with Flash, great ones even. There is much less need today to do auditions nationwide and meet the people who had those ideas. It is much easier nowadays to bring ideas into shape."

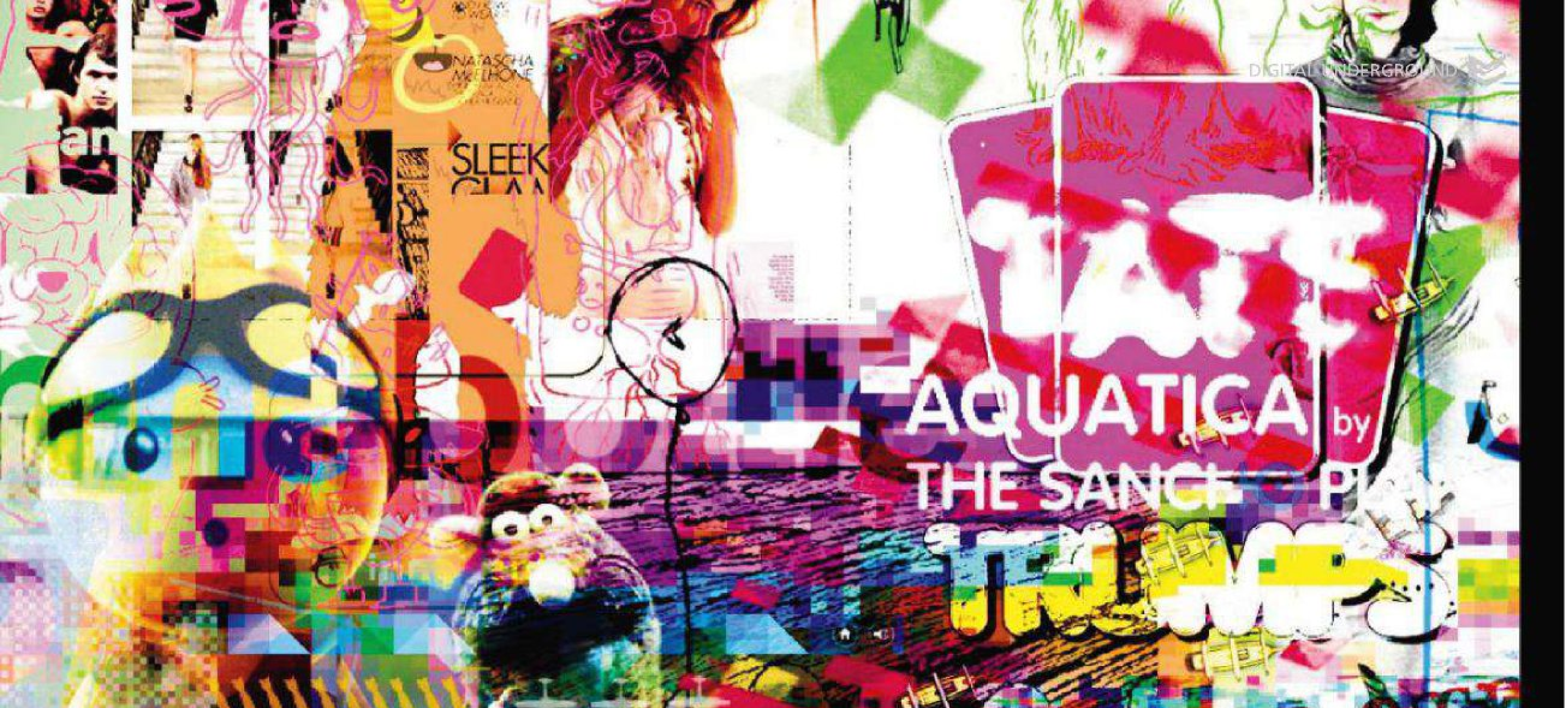
Even from Sony's most immediate rivals, competition is tough. Indeed, with just nine titles available on PSN that have been developed through the PS Camp initiative, Microsoft's XNA programme seems to offer better chances for a designer hoping to break into the industry. "The XNA programme allows projects that are developed with a small team to gain a direct access to the market," says Yamamoto. "I think [Microsoft] really succeeded in developing their approach into a business. In that sense, I fell they may have a lead on us. We are focused on putting the spotlight on a person and their idea, and then we get started from there. By comparison, Microsoft have a much quicker process of getting a project on to the online store. That is the advantage they have on us."

Likewise, Yamamoto is realistic about the challenge that the iPhone and Android markets pose to this kind of initiative. "We live in a time when games are sold for just ¥300 [£2]. You even have many games that you can play for free. For a company like SCE, you can't possibly compete against that. There are just too many people who are ready to make games for free who are more interested in delivering their ideas than really making a living out of them. By contrast, we as a company need to make profits. The only area we can compete against them in is by focusing on quality, service and support. Our challenge is to propose a quality gaming space which sits somewhere between the free gaming and the standard full-price gaming ones."

Whether game ideas are selected via talent-show contest or developed independently and judged after the fact by consumers – a group that might be even less kind than Simon Cowell – the industry can only benefit from opening up new channels for creativity to find its audience.

"WE LIVE IN A TIME WHEN PEOPLE CAN CREATE LOTS OF THINGS ON THEIR OWN. IT IS MUCH EASIER NOWADAYS TO DEVELOP IDEAS INTO SHAPE"


THE
BOARDGA
REMIX KIT
Game
Runners
PlayStation



DIGITAL UNDERGROUND

THE MOST INTERESTING OFFBEAT CONCEPTS ARE COMING OUT OF THE INDIE SECTOR, RIGHT? WRONG. IT COULD BE THAT THE MOST GROUNDBREAKING IDEAS ARE COMING FROM A CABAL OF STUDIOS SPECIALISING IN COMMISSIONED GAMES

On the top floor of a Victorian print works in London, within a stone's throw of Hoxton, a small studio named Preloaded is working on a game about death. Preloaded is hardly a famous name in British development – it doesn't create console blockbusters for EA or Activision, it's not a cult star of the indie scene. In some ways, despite the fact that its award-winning titles are played by millions, it sits outside of what we think of as the game industry. Preloaded's projects are distributed online for free, commissioned by the likes of the Wellcome Collection, Channel 4 and the Arts Council. Within ten miles there are at least five similar companies. They're not well known, but they are about to become a whole lot more important.

Traditional development is suffering in the UK. Away from the Lionheads, Rares and Rockstar Norths, the country is losing influence on the global stage, its companies asset-striped by foreign giants or reconfigured for outsourcing duties. But beyond the mainstream business, there is a thriving enclave of developers specialising in commissioned work. London-based digital creative agencies like Poke, Skive and Holler have evolved out of the marketing and web design sectors

TRENDING CONCEPT

LOCATION-BASED GAMES

Mudlark's *Chromaroma* is a sort of travel game for Oyster Card users. Funded and supported through Channel 4 and Screen West Midlands, it awards points to travellers every time they swipe their card; extra points are given for things like using it outside the rush hour or for reaching new destinations. Players can also get together to claim ownership of key areas such as train stations. "Trying to contextualise data to create personalised experiences is a hot area," says Rogers at Rehabstudio. "Geolocation, things like the Nike Grid campaign, where you're breaking away from the computer, especially as the uptake of smartphones increases, it's going to be a really nice area – the sort of online treasure hunt experience."

to provide big advertisers with interactive campaigns of increasing complexity. Meanwhile, experimental studios like Hide & Seek and Six To Start are at the vanguard of the whole transmedia explosion, combining television, theatre and gaming concepts into offbeat 'playful experiences' for a range of arts clients.

Five years ago, a lot of this work would have been about re-skinning vintage games with a brand identity – *Space Invaders* with cola bottles, *Pac-Man* with pizza. It was basic stuff, designed to ride the first wave of viral distribution. But the business is much more subtle now, and game design is improving as a result. "We don't make advergames. We don't make educational games," insists Preloaded creative director **Phil Stuart**. "We make games that have a purpose. We're not about marketing messages or didactic learning, we're about creating decent games that embed the objectives in their core."

Preloaded's 15-strong team is currently crafting *The End*, a highly stylised web-based platformer for Channel 4 Education. "It's come out of a germ of an idea from Alice Taylor, the education commissioner, about kids being unsupported in dealing with death," explains Stuart. "We're working with very little input; we're building it out of nothing." To kick off, the team brought in heavyweight game theorist and philosopher Tom Chatfield, author of Fun Inc, as writer and designer, and a young illustrator and comic-book artist named Luke Pearson to provide surreal backdrops and characters. The result is an experience that sounds a little like Hudson's *Lost In Shadow*, in which players manipulate shadows to make progress through each location. Throughout, players must answer questions like 'should you be able to choose how you die?' and 'do you think your soul lives on after death?' The more enlightened you become about dying, the darker the shadows you can cast. Player answers are also profiled for elements such as doubt, certainty, introversion and extroversion, and it's all socially connected via Facebook so users can compare their views on death with their friends. If there's one way to get teenagers to deal with death, it's through Facebook.

Broadcasters have become major game commissioners over the past five years, desperate to stay relevant as young audiences move away from linear entertainment. Channel 4 Education abandoned its TV output in 2008 and now concentrates solely on web, mobile and game projects, commissioning small UK studios like Preloaded, Fish In A Bottle and Six To Start to create topical and historical games such as *1066*, *Battle Of Britain: 303 Squadron* and the ambitious *SuperMe*. This year we'll also see intriguing projects like a sweatshop management sim from Littleloud and Preloaded's shoeshop game *Footfall*, in which players must use real-world fashion data to keep their ranges up to date. Meanwhile, the BBC runs dozens of increasingly ambitious games and virtual worlds on its CBeebies and CBBC sites. "Kids expect to be able to interact with what they see onscreen," says **Dominic Minns**, creative director of Plug-In Media, the BAFTA-winning studio that's put together rich interactive websites for Zingzillas and Big And Small. "They want to get in there and play around with stuff, and broadcasters are waking up to that."

The message isn't confined to the educational fringe, however. The renowned Brighton 'digital engagement' agency Kerb has created an array of viral games for MTV and Channel 4, backing up everything from Calum Best's reality TV show to prank-call comedy Fonejacker. Down the road, Plug-In Media is creating an



The End (below), created by Preloaded under creative director Phil Stuart (right), is only one element of the firm's exploration of grief



Commissioned by Channel 4, Fish In A Bottle's *303 Squadron* explores Polish airmen's contributions to protecting British skies. Notes and diaries from squadron members were used to create the story



interactive website to accompany the next series of Psychoville, complete with pages of narrative written by the show's creators, and minigames designed to look as though they've been thrown together by the programme's bizarre cast. "We're also creating a centralised hub to navigate the content," explains production director **Juliet Tzabar**, "and a unifying game mechanic to keep the audience guessing and engaged with the new content as it rolls out over the course of series two." As with Skins and Misfits, interactivity is becoming a key element of the series; it's not just about a flimsy website that directs viewers to DVD boxsets.

have a remit to make exciting and innovative products that don't have to sell." **David Jacklin**, chief producer at LittleLoud, agrees: "When I've presented my work in America they've been amazed by the depth of engagement, budget and reach of the projects we've delivered. Most American content has been very bolt-on and promotional. They've a long way to go before they understand this medium. There's no doubt we're building the most innovative larger scale campaigns that support TV content in interesting ways."

Littleloud's recently launched online adventure game *The Curfew* is indicative of the creative freedoms provided in the commissioned sector. Another Channel 4 project, it follows a selection of characters through a dystopian near-future Britain where civil liberties have been removed. "We wanted to tell a story that you couldn't tell in a traditional game," explains creative director **Darren Garrett**. "You get these four characters in a room and they tell their backstories; they don't do anything epic like overthrow the government – it's about their interactions. In a commercial game, you'd have to create a resistance fighter who ends up shooting the prime minister."

While this is happening, other studios are partnering with galleries and museums to define new forms of gameplay. Last year, crossplatform production company Mudlark launched Such Tweet Sorrow, a month-long version of Romeo And Juliet running over Twitter. Organised with the RSC, it represented a weird

"WHEN I'VE PRESENTED MY WORK IN AMERICA THEY'VE BEEN AMAZED BY THE DEPTH OF ENGAGEMENT, BUDGET AND REACH OF THE PROJECTS WE'VE DELIVERED"

UK studios are also picking up a lot of work in the US, despite the presence there of similar agencies like Area/Code, Glow Interactive and the ARG specialist 42 Entertainment. Warwick-based studio Fish In A Bottle worked with the BBC and NBC Universal to create a Heroes MMOG. As MD **Justin Eames** explains: "Tim Kring was really pioneering the transmedia approach at the time, so when the Heroes scriptwriters saw what we were doing they gave us a lot of freedom. We ended up creating a UK-based character in our online world and she appeared in series two of the TV show, which was a significant milestone." Brighton-based studio LittleLoud handled the game tie-ins for the Watchmen and Iron Man movies, and has multiple projects lined up with Paramount Pictures and Marvel this year, including 3D web games for Thor and Captain America.

A key reason for this transatlantic success is that British studios have been able to combine brand work with innovative, big-budget projects for public service broadcasters. "There are two reasons for the UK's success in this sector, and they are Channel 4 and the BBC," says Minns. "Whereas in the US, all the commissions are commercially led, Channel 4 and BBC

TRENDING CONCEPT

VIRTUAL WORLDS/SOCIAL PLATFORMS

Single games are passé. Many brands and broadcasters are now looking for virtual worlds. Plug-In Media has created integrated interactive hubs for most of its educational projects, while Fish In A Bottle is developing 'a new sort of social platform' with Channel 4. "There's a whole reward system in there that plays like a subtle game and encourages people to share their stories and life experiences with the world," explains Eames.





The Curfew (above) is a futuristic drama based on the erosion of civil liberties. Its developer, LittleLoud, reckons the focus on characters and their stories wouldn't have been possible in a mainstream game. Kerb's *Patapon 2* tie-in game *The Art Of War* (top) is available via most popular online game portals





Hide & Seek (director Alex Fleetwood, below) arranges social play events as well as making games. For its Sony-sponsored Gamerunners project (above) it worked with schoolchildren to create a range of new puzzle games. Right: one of the Tate Trumps cards produced by the studio



TRENDING CONCEPT

HEAD TRACKING

Inspired by Kinect, brands are now looking to engage customers physically. Rehabstudio has launched a couple of highly interactive sites that use the webcam as a navigational tool, and Plug-In Media has built simple head-tracking games. A recent online project for the bottled water brand Drench let users pop onscreen bubbles by headbutting them.

"TEN YEARS AGO THERE WAS HARDLY A BRAND WITH AN AUDIENCE OVER 21 THAT WOULD MAKE A GAME. BUT NOW BRAND MANAGERS CAN RELATE TO GAMES"

merger of theatre, social networking and adventure gaming. "It definitely wasn't intended as a game," says managing director **Toby Barnes**. "There was no win status – it was much more about exploring the various pieces of narrative. But the interesting thing is we used lots of different media, from YouTube to LastFM and Spotify, and some of the more in-depth audience members were really hunting them down. It became much more like an ARG."

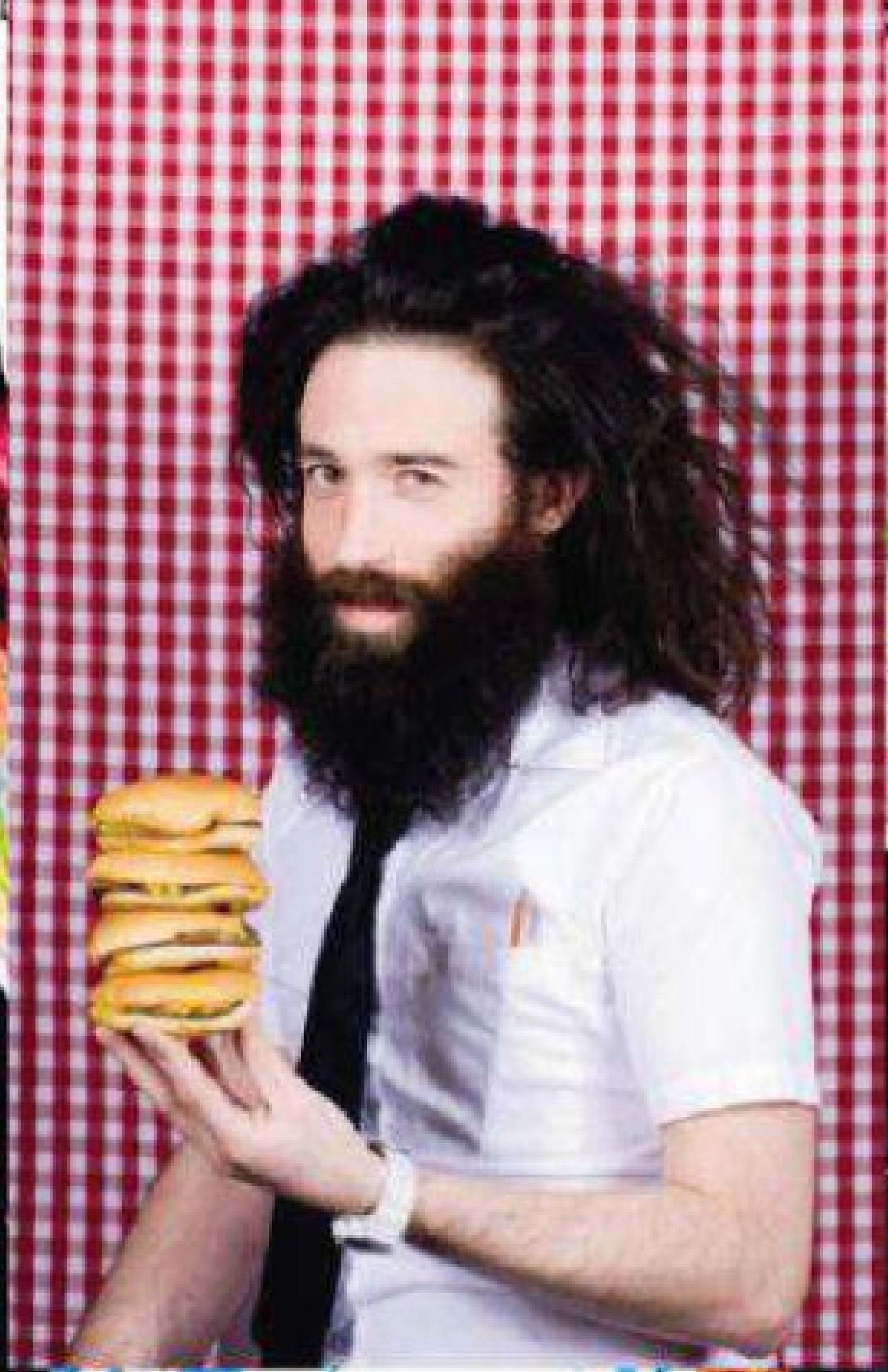
In 2008, South London-based studio Hide & Seek, which started out as a festival organised by one-time TV and film producer **Alex Fleetwood**, worked with pioneering interactive theatre company Punchdrunk on a game (or 'multiplatform immersive theatre experience') called *Last Will* – a two-player *Myst*-style production in which participants played in pairs, one via computer and another exploring a real-world location, based in an old warehouse in Shoreditch. Hide & Seek has also created Tate Trumps for the Tate Modern – an iPhone app that rates every work in the gallery in terms such as strength, agility and menace. Players must guess which paintings are strong in each category, then collect seven works before engaging in a Top Trumps-style battle with friends. The aim is to get visitors thinking about the collections in new ways. The studio has also just started two games for the Royal Opera House. One is a casual iPhone app, the other, in the words of Fleetwood, "is a lot more hardcore, slightly insane and the most exciting thing that's on our radar at the moment."

Then you have Clerkenwell-based studio Do Tank, just about to release *Papa Sangre*, an iPhone game with no visuals, relying on binaural sound to guide the player through. That's funded by Channel 4, but big commercial brands are also getting into the idea of experimental, theatrical experiences with gaming undertones. Glasgow-based agency Chunk is an expert in this area, getting a cinema full of people to control giant virtual purple eyebrows for Cadbury and organising a mass game of virtual 'keepie-uppie' on Oxford Street with Jamie Redknapp and hundreds of children for Disney.

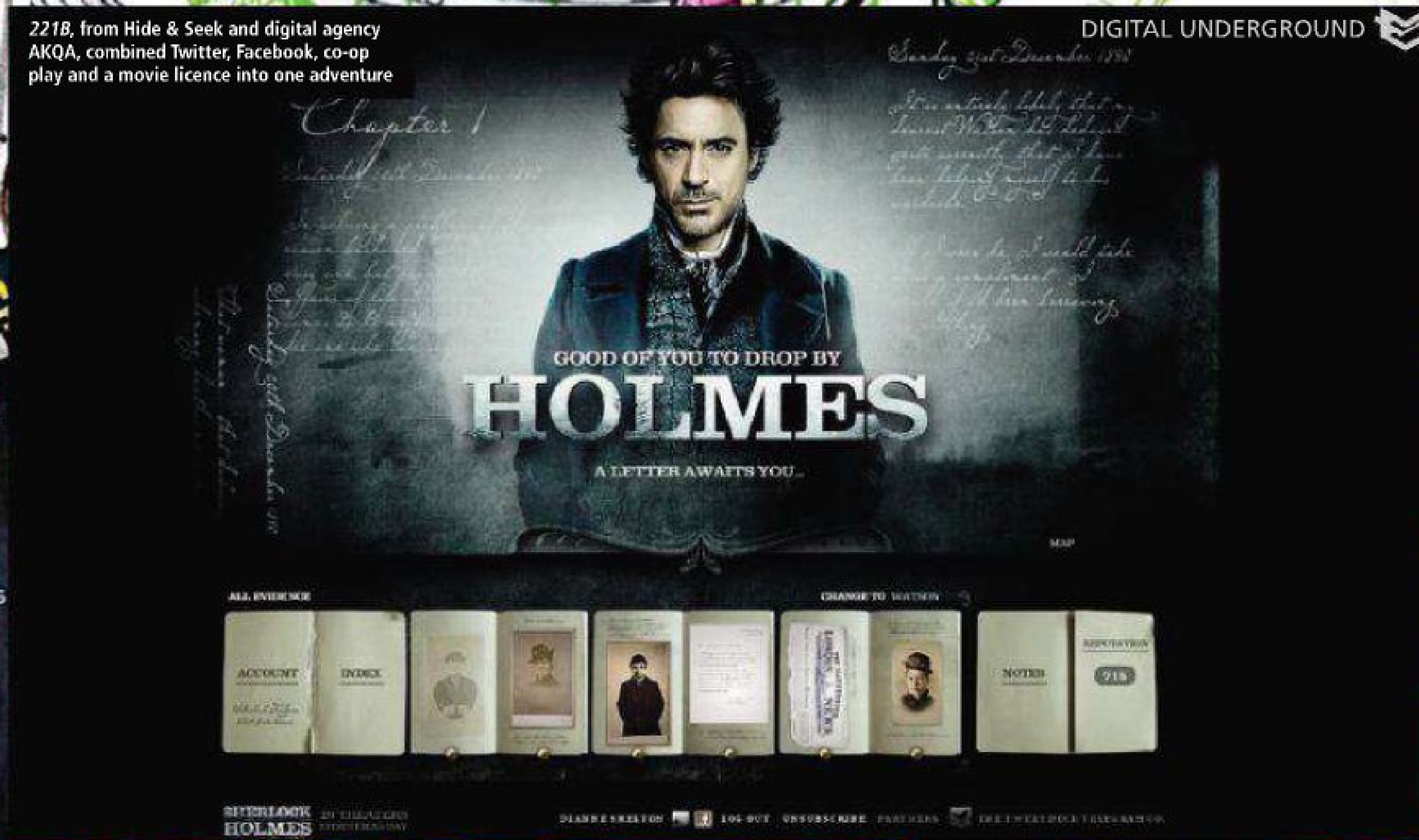
Across the board, brand work is becoming more interesting. Big advertisers are now seeing games as a key means of creating a buzz, and specifically of generating brand advocates – influential consumers who'll spread the message among their peers. "We've hit a time where '80s gamers are in their 40s and more women than ever are playing games, so there's an age group for almost every brand," says **Donnie Kerrigan**, managing director of Glasgow-based agency Chunk. "Ten years ago there was hardly a brand with an audience over 21 that would make a game. But now brand managers can relate to games because they've grown up as gamers too."

Many advertisers are keen to be perceived as cutting-edge innovators, and use games to communicate this. "Doritos are a super-advanced marketer and they're not afraid to push it," says **Tim Rogers**, creative director at Rehabstudio, which worked with the snack company to launch a new flavour via an epic, interactive web campaign. "It takes progressive brands like that whose target fits with digital – and that tends to be younger males who have the gamer mentality. You see those brands taking the first step, and it's almost like a Paris catwalk – 18 months later you'll see similar ideas from a brand you wouldn't have expected it from."

And while mainstream games are only just getting to grips with social media, its implementation is taken for granted here. For Guy Ritchie's Sherlock Holmes movie,



Tim Rogers (above), creative director at Rehab: "The pace of digital is immense. We have an R&D department who are constantly churning out new ideas that we can turn into campaign treatments"



221B, from Hide & Seek and digital agency AKQA, combined Twitter, Facebook, co-op play and a movie licence into one adventure



Hide & Seek created *221B*, an asynchronous twoplayer Facebook detective game which allowed gamers to play as either Holmes or Watson, swapping clues and theories, and following Twitter feeds of the film's characters. Elsewhere, Kerb released a game a week for the C4 series Misfits, one of the most intriguing of which was based around the shape-shifting character, Lucy. It pulls in friends' comments from your Facebook wall and puts them beside fake messages – you have to spot which are really from people you know.

There are definite parallels between commissioned and social games: the need to embrace a non-gamer audience, to capture and maintain attention in a competitive online marketplace. As Kerb founder **Jim McNiven** argues: "Social gaming represents the evolution of viral gaming. They follow the same philosophy: there's no lose, just degrees of winning. When I was looking to get funding for our own games a couple of years ago, I used a quote from someone who was studying the social games sector. He said 'when you analyse companies like Zynga and Playfish what becomes immediately obvious is that these are not games companies, they are viral marketing companies'. To me, that resonates. What we've always done is make content that drives traffic and we use all manner of different devices to do that. Zynga does all the stuff we did, but rather than using it to market wares, now the internet is monetised, they're using it to make cash."

Similarities also exist in the approach to the player. It's all about immediacy and functionality. "Everything we do is very user-led," says Preloaded's Phil Stuart. "There's a lot of user research, a lot of focus testing with kids, making sure they're into what we're doing. That works for Channel 4 and also for brands – it reassures them. This focus on user experience comes from being product-based rather than game-based – we put the emphasis on the on-ramp so you get to the content very quickly. We have this 'ten seconds till fun' rule, revealing complexity gradually. There's so much stuff online, it needs to suck people in immediately."

And, like the big social game creators, user research in this sector goes deeper than focus groups – every interaction with a branded game on Facebook is monitored. "It depends on the personal settings but we use different algorithms to get the background on a person," says Rogers at Rehabstudio. "We can get any data, including the user's friends. We did a campaign last summer, an online mystery adventure, which was video-based, and we used Facebook Connect to pull each player's friends into the videos, it was one of the first times that was done."

Traditional game publishers have

TRENDING CONCEPT

USER-GENERATED CONTENT

"One thing that's very important to brands is the idea of brand advocates, and user-generated content can be an effective way of creating them," says Ian McNiven of Kerb. In 2009 his studio created a Flash game to promote *Patapon 2* – it let users collect graphical assets which could be used to make *Patapon 2* wallpapers. Over 100,000 were uploaded to the supporting website. "That is just a shitload of *Patapon* content that people have taken ownership off and bought more people into."

TRENDING CONCEPT

YOUVIEW

The internet-connected TV platform from the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 is set to launch sometime in mid-2011. It will provide an interesting new arena for commissioned games – especially TV tie-ins, allowing seamless movement from linear to interactive content. "We'll be keeping a close eye on it," says Juliet Tzabar at Plug-In, "particularly in terms of what it might offer to the children's audience, who we think are likely to expect a more active engagement with their TV sets than their parents' generation."

certainly taken notice. Keen to get into the social space without 'doing an EA' and spending $275m to buy an experienced developer, they're calling on the makers of branded games. Plug-In Media has just done the tech work on Codemasters' Facebook RPG *Utopia Kingdoms*, while Kerb is currently working on a major Facebook title for, as McNiven puts it, "one of the five big game publishers". Kerb is also a roster agency for Sony, cranking out viral web games to market big releases like *Patapon*, *Uncharted* and *ModNation Racers*. And last year Fish In A Bottle created a social version of *DJ Hero 2*. "We came up with a unique feature that let players create their own gameplay mixes using commercial tracks from the likes of Lady Gaga and Deadmau5," explains Eames. "People could then challenge their friends to play the mixes through Facebook and publish their scores. We hit over ten million plays in six weeks."

Part of the reason branded games are becoming more complex is, of course, down to technology. Flash, still the key platform for online titles, continues to evolve: 3D visuals are already supported via thirdparty engines like Away3D, but with the next iteration of the platform, Adobe is adding hardware-accelerated 3D graphics capability. "The Flash GPU enabled 3D API codenamed 'Molehill' should be in the next version of the FlashPlayer," says **Seb Lee-Delisle**, technical director at Plug-In Media and something of a Flash expert. "It's based on OpenGL and DirectX. Up until now, we've had to render 3D within Flash using a software renderer, limiting us to fewer than 10,000 triangles. With hardware-accelerated graphics we'll be able to render millions of triangles at 60fps."

Most of the developers are moving away from a reliance on Flash toward other platform-agnostic systems. Several are experimenting with HTML5, which also allows for hardware-accelerated 3D visuals. As **Adrian Hon**, founder of Six To Start, explains: "Someone's made a massively multiplayer *Asteroids* clone using web sockets, which is a new part of HTML5 where you can keep a connection live and open. It used to be really hard to do that. It's not perfect, but it makes you think that you could make, for instance, a multiplayer *Diablo* clone in HTML – you'd have to use Firefox or Chrome, but it's safer to assume people will have those than it used to be."

The multipurpose 3D engine Unity has also become popular in the sector. "It's great for Flash developers like myself who have become disillusioned with trying to make Flash work quickly with 3D," says **Chris Padmore**, senior rich media developer at London-based digital creative agency Public. "They've got two languages you can program in: Unity script, which is a sort of hybrid Java script, really similar to AS3, and C#, which I currently love; it gives you access to all the mono framework stuff – you can create 3D experiences quickly without necessarily needing to know the very low level stuff around it." Rogers at Rehabstudio is similarly enthused: "It's fantastic – we can publish to the web, to Apple OS, to Wii. We've been constrained by technology in the past, but this is essentially an Xbox in your browser. It's incredible. What's great is combining that with the Facebook data – we get to create very personalised gaming experiences in 3D in realtime."

Interestingly, most of these studios are now looking into developing their own IP, and Unity has become a key driver of that. Easy portability to digital platforms like smartphones, Xbox Live and PSN means that even the smallest teams can create and distribute their own titles. But they're not abandoning their offbeat take on what gaming actually is. Hide & Seek recently launched The



App and ebook The Boardgame Remix Kit (right) from Hide & Seek does pretty much what you'd expect. A print edition is coming

Battle Of The Bands (below) is a title developed by Plug-In Media that ties in to the BBC's children's mockumentary My Almost Famous Family. *Spot The Difference* (below left) is part of Public's successful campaign for smoothie firm Innocent. The agency has also worked for Camelot and, for Nike, created a touchscreen football game in its Soweto football academy





Boardgame Repair Kit, an iPhone app that provides users with new ways to play the likes of Monopoly and Trivial Pursuit, mashing them together and adding videogame concepts – so, for example, Cluedo becomes a survival horror adventure. Six To Start is working on a casual iPhone game that includes ARG elements; players will receive calls and emails from in-game characters on their handsets.

Molesworth, a senior lecturer in digital marketing at Bournemouth University. "It's not that there is anything fundamentally wrong with them, but I think there are more interesting play-forms out there. Look at how people figure out new games on Twitter, for example [tinyurl.com/twitgames]. And Facebook is full of all sorts of roleplay, risky play and language games. I'd like to see more brands experiment with play across these formats.

"For me, the most impressive 'branded' games are often commercial titles. Look at *GT5*. It is full of brands – they add to the play and are fully integrated. It's worth noting that at the same time as finding all sorts of ways to avoid traditional brand communication, ad blockers, digital video recorders and so on, consumers are actively seeking out new ways to interact with brands. They just don't care much for ads that interrupt the things they actually want to do."

"DESPITE AVOIDING TRADITIONAL BRAND COMMUNICATION, CONSUMERS ARE SEEKING OUT NEW WAYS TO INTERACT WITH BRANDS. THEY JUST DON'T CARE MUCH FOR ADS"

There is certainly a growing sense of entitlement in this sector. A few years ago, it really was a different world to mainstream gaming – a world of worthy historical strategy titles and throwaway *Space Invaders* clones with brands splattered all over them. But technology, marketing and design have all moved on, and now, with the social gaming explosion, these studios are in the right place to stake a claim on the mainstream market. Indeed, through the likes of *Farmville*, *Angry Birds* and Kinect, the audience is meeting them halfway. "The traditional games industry is a bit snobbish about how easy our games are, but it's the way all games are going," says McNiven. "When I'm playing console games now, they seem to have restart points pretty much where I just got killed – it's like: 'Why did I even die? Why aren't I just bullet-proof?'"

In the future, it's likely there will be no discernible division between branded games and consumer releases. In-game advertising has so far failed to bring about this era, but that's probably because shoving a billboard in a game is just as shallow as creating a *Galaxian* clone featuring Jelly Babies. The psychology is all wrong; seamless playful implementation is the key. "Play doesn't need to be restricted to small, Flash-based games," says **Dr Mike**

TRENDING CONCEPT

AUGMENTED OR ALTERNATIVE REALITY GAMES

Augmented reality concepts were hip in 2010, cropping up in everything from breakfast cereals to Burger King meals, while the idea of web-based alternative reality games has been popularised by US studio 42 Entertainment. Companies are becoming more ambitious – Six To Start has just finished a project showing Disney how ARG concepts can be integrated into its theme parks to create a new generation of interactive narrative rides.





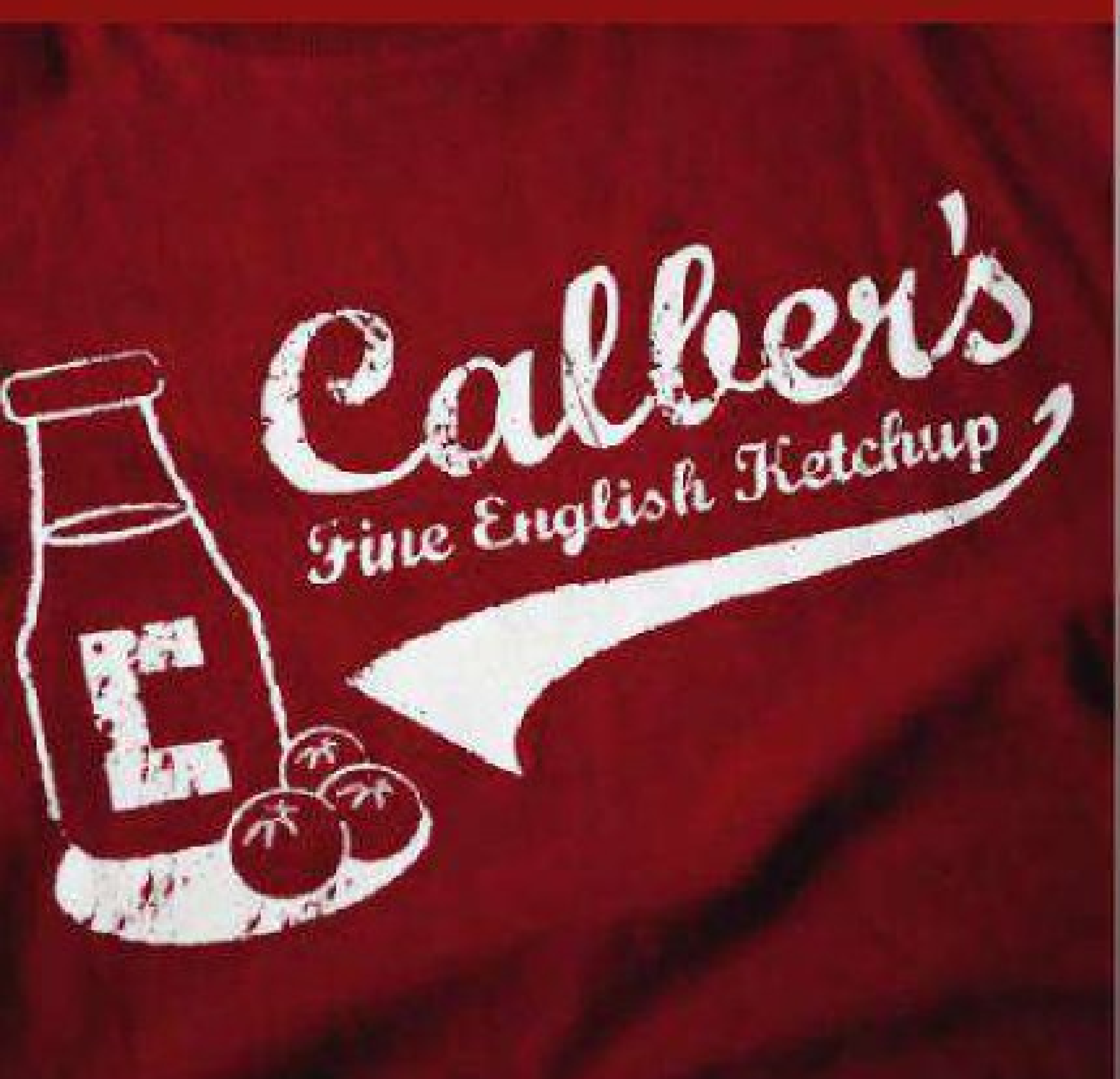
Marketing in games is nothing new, as these shots from *Burnout Paradise* (top) and *Gran Turismo 5* (above) show. The important thing about these types of adverts, however, is that they don't get in the way of the gameplay in the way three minutes of important messages can impact on our enjoyment of TV

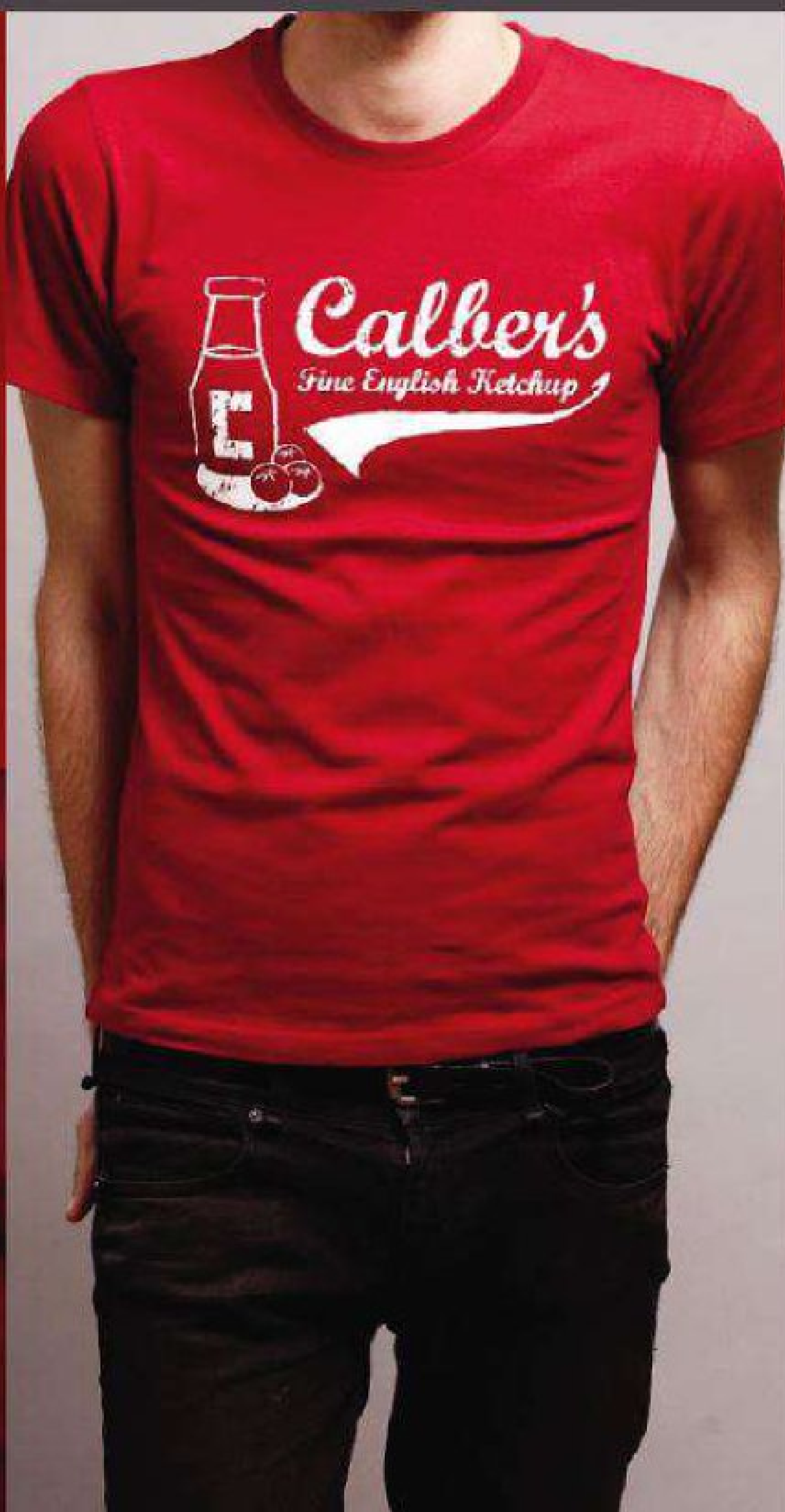
Subscribe to **Edge** and receive two fantastic Insert Coin T-shirts

Worth £40



There are hundreds of T-shirts inspired by the world of videogames – and then there are T-shirts inspired by the world of videogames created by Insert Coin Clothing. We like them so much that we've teamed up with the company to give you two examples when you subscribe to **Edge** this month. Riffing on *Metal Gear Solid* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*, and worth £40, they're available in Medium, Large and Extra Large sizes. For more info, and to see the entire range – available via free worldwide delivery – visit www.insertcoinclothing.com







- Receive two T-shirts from Insert Coin Clothing
- Save over 30% off the cover price
- Pay by Direct Debit – only £19.99 every six months
- Delivery direct to your door
- Never miss an issue

INSERT COIN

ONLINE: myfavouritemagazines.co.uk/edgP19

CALL: 0844 848 2852 (quote ref EDGP19)

Offer for UK Direct Debit subscribers only. You will receive 13 issues per year. Your subscription will start with the next available issue. Minimum subscription term is 12 months. If at any time in the first 60 days you are dissatisfied please notify us in writing and we will refund you for all un-mailed issues. The gift is subject to availability. In the unlikely event of stocks becoming exhausted, we reserve the right to substitute with items of a similar value. Offer ends 29/03/11. Order ref: EDGP19. Full details of the Direct Debit guarantee will be provided and are available upon request. Prices for overseas subscribers can be found on p104 and at www.myfavouritemagazines.co.uk/edg

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers



Edge's most played

Ninja Gaiden II



A roaring rampage of revenge that demands lightning reflexes, steel nerves and the cold, dead eyes of a ninja assassin. Hayabusa is still in a class of his own, despite Bayonetta.
360, TECMO

Fable III



There's no better antidote to po-faced fantasy than indulging in a bit of cross-dressing at a party before shooting a gnome that claims to have violated your mum.
360, MICROSOFT

Vanquish



Feeling powerful is one thing; feeling *awesome* is another. From boosting at high speed to shooting in slow motion, the rhythms of combat have rarely felt so good.
360, PS3, SEGA

Intellectual property fights

Can something old and borrowed become new?



The games discussed below are almost all Capcom IPs, such as *Okamiden* (left), but western devs will freely trade IPs between them too. 343 Industries has much to prove with its first *Halo* title, for instance

Arc System Works has impressed upon its first *Contra* game – this issue's *Hard Corps: Uprising* (p105) – the unmistakable aesthetic stamp that defines its games. *Uprising* could easily be mistaken for a *Guilty Gear* spin-off rather than the torch-carrier of Konami's series, and is a perfect showcase of the benefits of letting new teams get stuck into old IP. By contrast, though developer Fat Shark has swallowed members of the team behind the first *Bionic Commando: Rearmed*, its sequel tries to raise the tempo with more action and less pause for thought. It doesn't always work, an unhappy arranged marriage between original mechanics and overactive levels that lacks the taut cohesion of the first title.

Barring a sea change in how IP rights are handled, much-loved franchises will continue to be passed between teams, directors and even developers. This isn't always a bad thing, not least if it frees up the originators of exciting ideas to go on originating exciting ideas. It's hard not to wonder, though, what *Okamiden* would be like if the ex-Clover staff of Platinum Games were behind it – not because it's unfaithful, but because at times Capcom's in-house team seems lumbered by the expectation that a sequel should be just like Clover's game.

It's interesting to compare to the *Marvel Vs Capcom* series, meanwhile, a long-standing example of what happens when a developer is able to take a relatively unfettered approach to an IP it hasn't originated. In Capcom's hands, Wolverine et al become characters in a beat 'em up first and comic-book characters second – with rivalries and relative power balances temporarily suspended for some brightly coloured brawling. Yet it feels true to Marvel's characters, perhaps because the comic-book giant toys with its creations enough that a fighting game isn't out of place.

IP is a valuable thing – and not just in terms of potential sales. Capcom could have made a brand-new DS game, for instance, yet it's hard not to be pleasantly reminded of *Okami* the first time *Okamiden*'s wolf pup protagonist offers a triumphant howl. But developers taking on IP that's not their own are faced with a difficult challenge: not sacrificing their subject's identity while trying to impart some of their own.

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



KILLZONE 3

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: FEBRUARY 22 (US), FEBRUARY 25 (UK)
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: GUERRILLA GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E215, E222









Killzone's cover system (you hold L2 or the Move button to duck behind an object) offers less safety than that of many similar games: attack is the best defence when the wall you're hiding behind doesn't cover your head

Clichéd it might be, but the space-fascist styling which defines both the character and aesthetics of *Killzone*'s Helghast antagonists couldn't be more appropriate. For *Killzone 3*, even more than its predecessors, is a game that blitzes the player's senses, bombarding them with such an overload of visual and aural stimuli that, at times, it's a struggle to keep up. When you're hunkered down behind cover, with a five-storey-tall mech raining mortar fire on your position and an exoskeleton-wearing ally stomping nearby, your biggest struggle isn't staying alive, it's keeping your sights centred long enough to fire back.

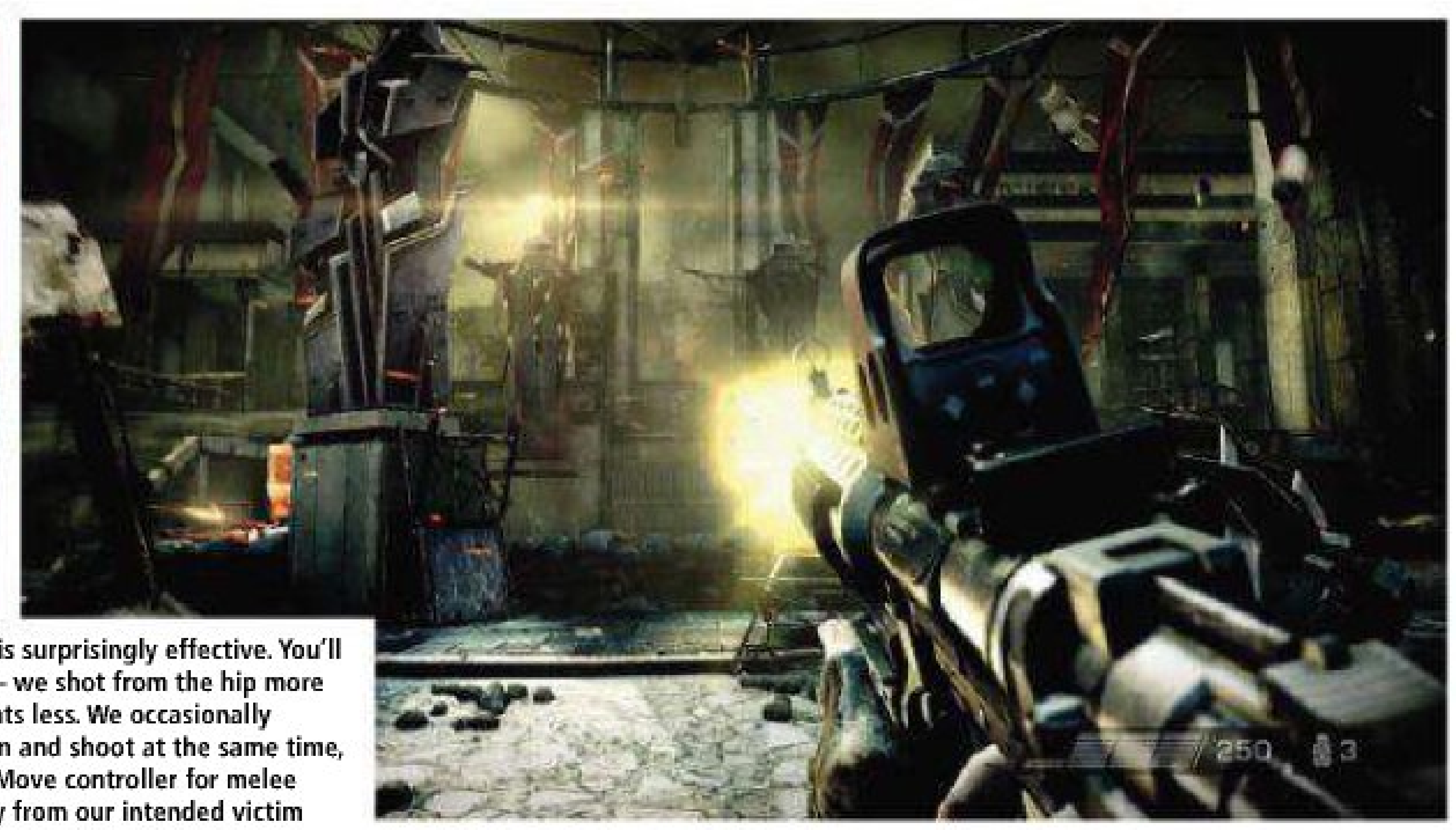
For the most part it works, the clatter of machine-guns and the roar of explosions providing a more than effective audio accompaniment to *Killzone 3*'s backdrop of near-constant devastation. War might be hell, but most developers treat it like a rollercoaster ride, with twists, turns, and rising, ratcheting moments of tension before sudden drops. Guerrilla, with isolated exceptions, keeps things constantly pitched somewhere between incessant and relentless, forcefully carving for itself an atmospheric space which might be at times fatiguing, but is undeniably distinct from that of its competition.

> Guerrilla keeps things pitched somewhere between incessant and relentless, carving an atmospheric space distinct from that of its competition

You move a little faster this time, and while this has diminished some sense of your character's weight, *Killzone*'s weaponry has lost none of its sheer, all-out force. A force more than complemented by environments which, while not fully destructible, have been filled with more than enough bits and pieces which crumple or shatter after a modest application of bullets. Not least of these are the Helghast themselves, whose AI, while not tangibly improved, is no less aggressive this time around. Formidable, yet never unfair, their ability to suppress, flank and outmanoeuvre you shines on higher difficulties.

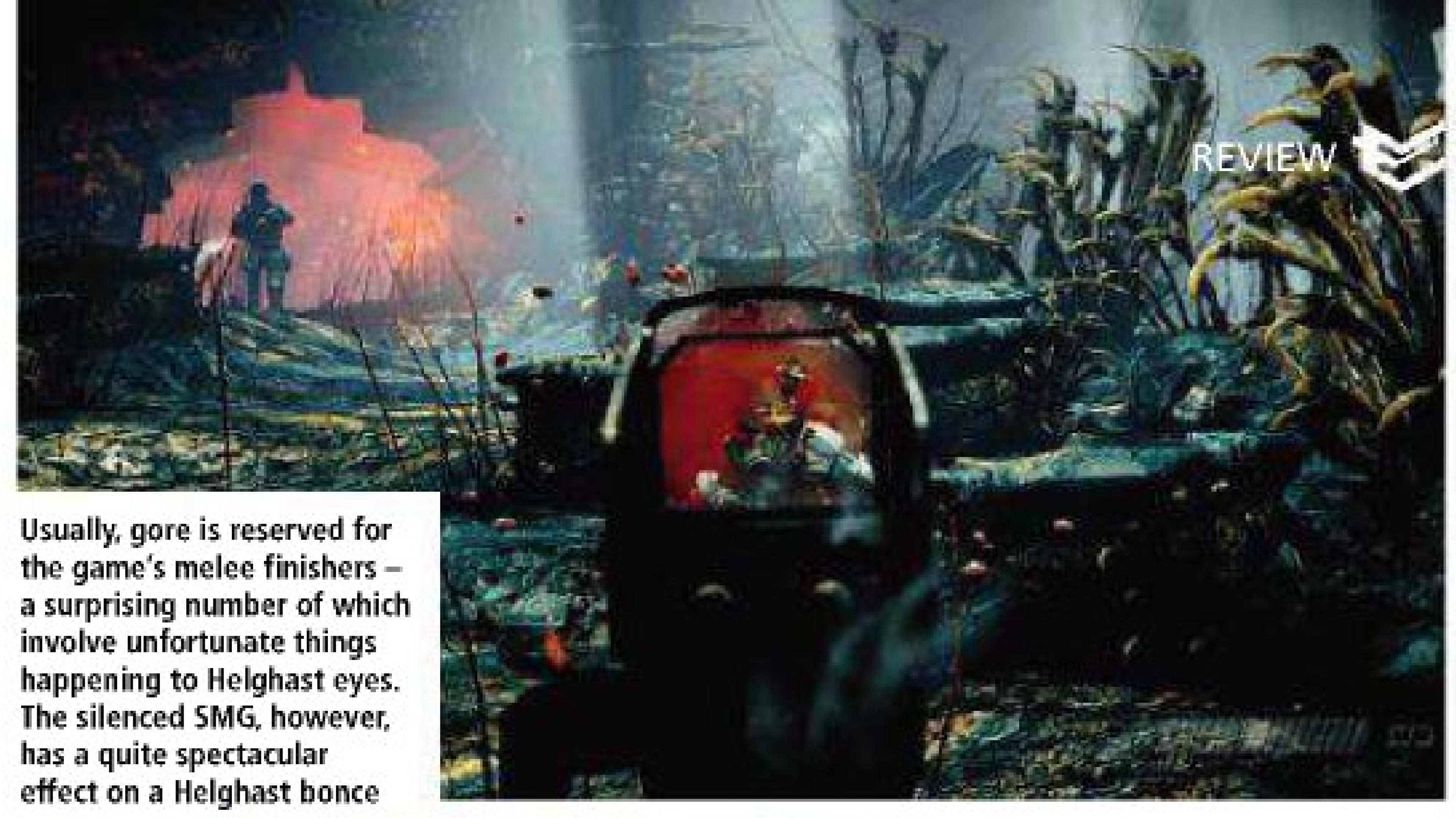
So far, so *Killzone 2*. Indeed, the game's first few levels take place in the immediate aftermath of its predecessor's conclusion, and suffer from many of the same limitations. For all the punchy intensity of its combat, and the cleverness of its

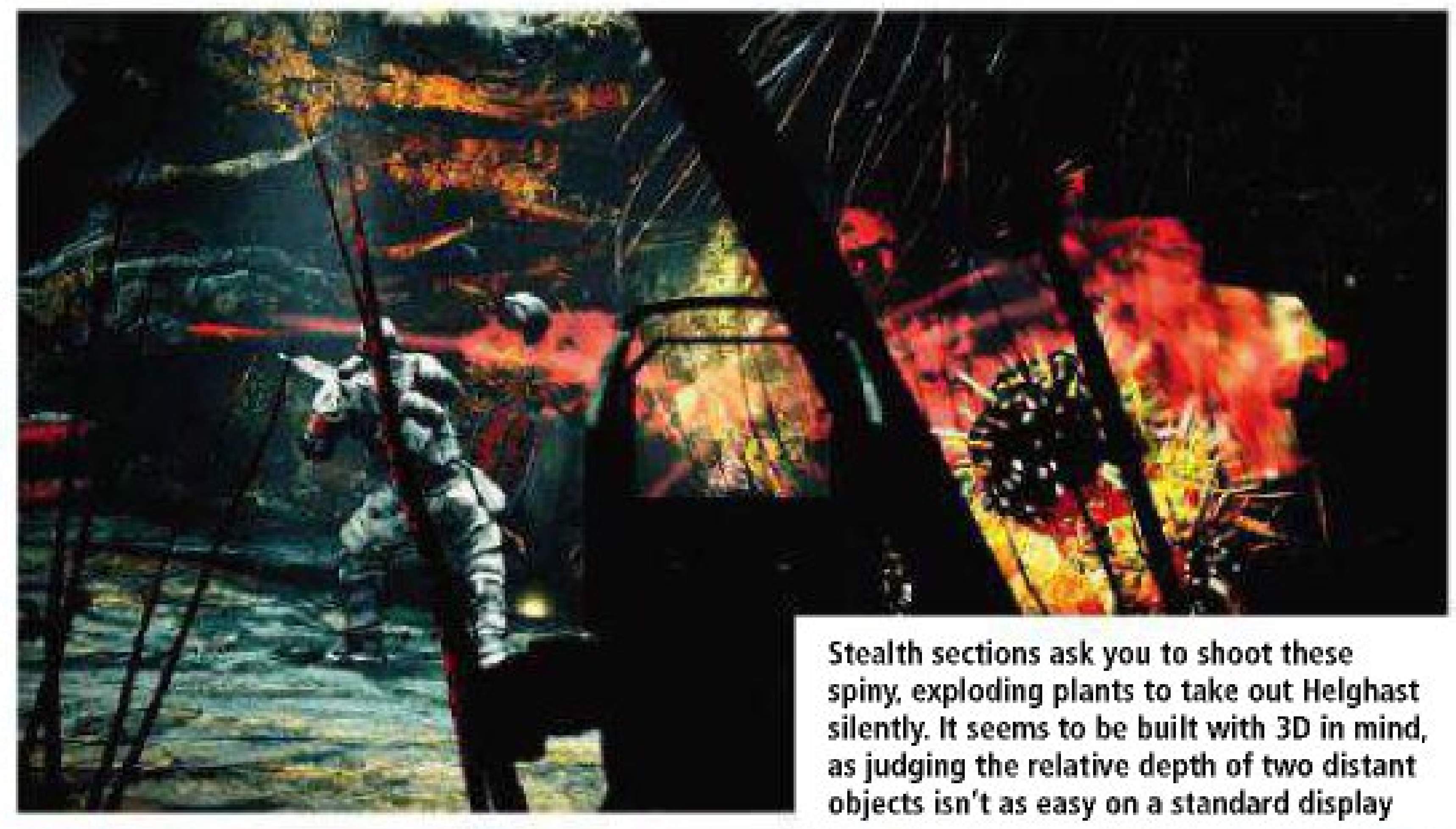




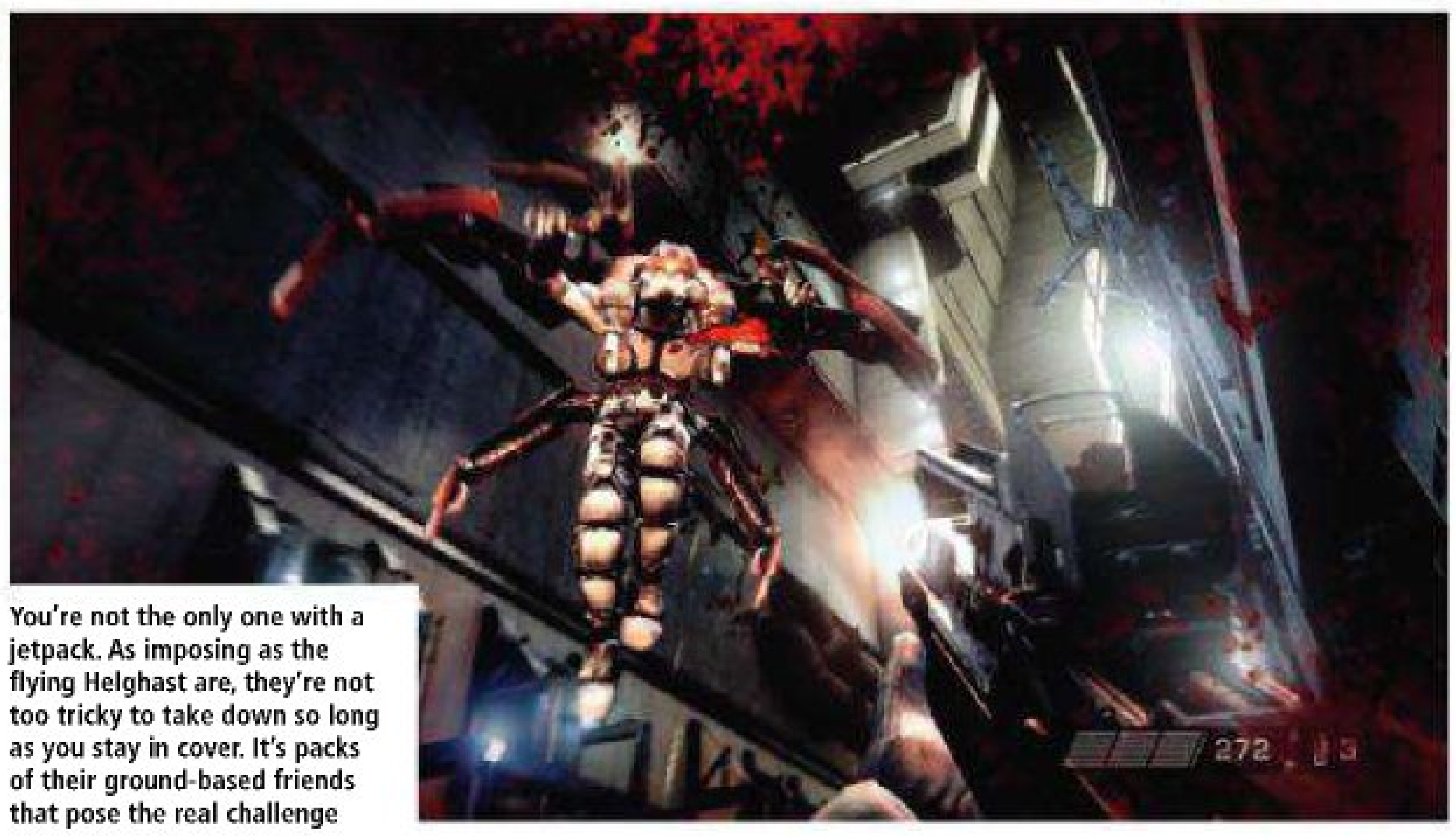
Using Move with *Killzone 3* is surprisingly effective. You'll find it alters your playstyle – we shot from the hip more accurately and used the sights less. We occasionally fumbled when having to turn and shoot at the same time, however, and thrusting the Move controller for melee would cause us to turn away from our intended victim




Usually, gore is reserved for the game's melee finishers – a surprising number of which involve unfortunate things happening to Helghast eyes. The silenced SMG, however, has a quite spectacular effect on a Helghast bonce


Stealth sections ask you to shoot these spiny, exploding plants to take out Helghast silently. It seems to be built with 3D in mind, as judging the relative depth of two distant objects isn't as easy on a standard display

The story is much improved on the forgettable plot of the second game, and features Malcolm McDowell, as a power-hungry industrialist, getting his finely rendered teeth around all the high-resolution scenery he can find


You're not the only one with a jetpack. As imposing as the flying Helghast are, they're not too tricky to take down so long as you stay in cover. It's packs of their ground-based friends that pose the real challenge



combatants, Guerrilla rarely allows you to truly put that AI to the test: you engage the Helghast on the game's terms, not your own, funnelled along defined routes and making use of cover points thoughtfully and conveniently provided. Vehicle and turret sections might change the pace – but only by making the game even more of a shooting gallery. And then, a few levels in, Guerrilla begins to experiment.

As if to underscore the change, the game is given a makeover. Whereas *Killzone 2*'s palette was almost uniformly drab – a murky mix of dark greys and browns, offset by the occasional dab of yellow or green – all of a sudden *Killzone 3* takes on a colour scheme of white, orange and a cool ice blue. We leave the ruins and rubble behind, and journey through a cave system which, with its brightly coloured flora, reminds us that Helghan is an alien planet and not just an endless urban sprawl. Later levels take place on frozen oil platforms and in research labs built from blue steel and green glass reminiscent of *Metal Gear Solid*'s Shadow Moses. The *Killzone* series has always had a confident art style, combining utilitarian sci-fi with anime stylings; now, finally, it's held up to the light.

The pace slows, too, as the game hands returning protagonist Tomas 'Sev' Sevchenko a silenced submachine-gun and sends him on his merry way to a sneaking mission. This one-off level, which borrows *Far Cry 2*'s trick of hiding in long grass but fails to complement it with Ubisoft's open-ended level design, feels like an extended tutorial for stealth mechanics that are used at no other point in the game. A more exciting addition is the jetpack which, when it makes its fleeting appearances, gives players the chance to surprise the Helghast with death-from-above assaults in some larger arenas. But even this tool is rationed severely – hardly used after the introductory level designed around its abilities.

For its final third, *Killzone 3* reverts to type: assaulting positions, defending positions, and turret sections. Lots of turret sections. It's some of the most polished, intense and impactful linear shooting you'll fine, but it's still just linear shooting. Guerrilla's willingness to branch out from the standard formula at points is to be encouraged, but its new mechanical threads simply aren't woven back into the rest of the game. It's playing in co-op that truly reveals the campaign's tactical limitations – there's little scope for players to experiment together, merely the opportunity to get fired at and fire back, side by side.

Multiplayer and the new, AI-populated Botzone let a different brand of gunplay take centre stage, with a range of *Team Fortress 2*-style character classes and an extensive collection of character-customising bells and whistles adding a layer of tactical nuance (see 'Black ops'). Naturally, it's time spent in these modes that will hold the key to the game's long-term appeal.

Previous instalments in this technically strong but creatively lacking series have been one-note, papering over a lack of originality with a hefty dose of shock and awe. *Killzone 3*, by contrast, attempts to wage a more varied war. It succeeds, just, by offering a tour of locations both more visually interesting and diverse than its forebears, but it all still depends heavily on the brutal impact of the shooting at its core. **[7]**

Black ops



The headline addition to *Killzone*'s multiplayer is the new Operations mode. Playing as either ISA or Helghast, this gametype interweaves combat and cutscenes to add (at least a little) narrative to the slaughter. It works well, rewarding the top three players with a starring role in the next scene, so the prowess of TheXterminator1987 is clear for all to see. It's a natural extension of the second game's Warzone mode – a random, rolling cycle of seven game types which already gave multiplayer matches a sense of grand scale. This mode, along with a standard deathmatch, returns, but it's the class system that is likely to keep you playing. With five to choose from, such as the turret-laying Engineer or stealthy Infiltrator, they make multiplayer gunplay far more diverse than that within the singleplayer game.







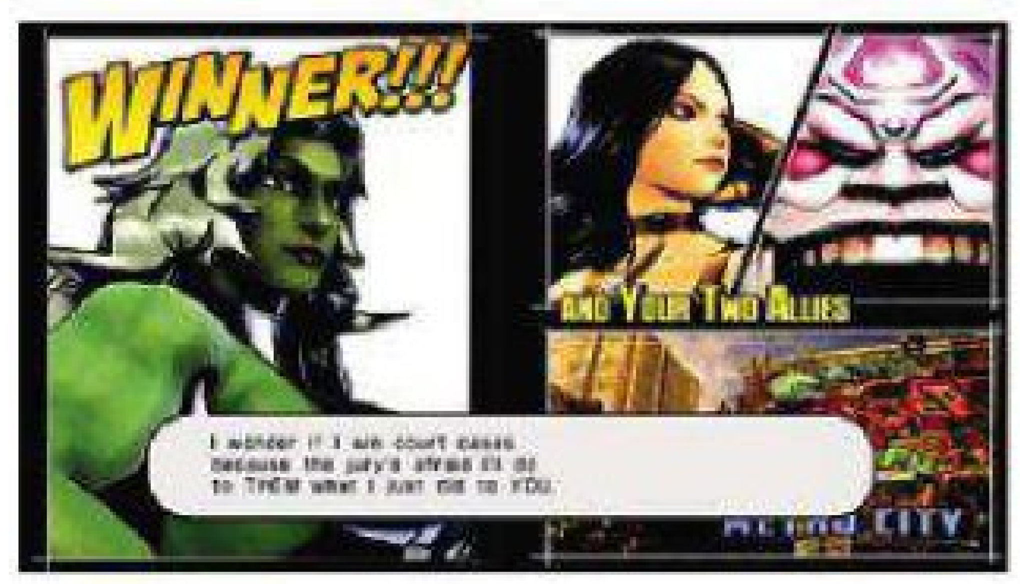
MARVEL VS. CAPCOM 3: FATE OF TWO WORLDS

FORMAT: **360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED)**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 18** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** PREVIOUSLY IN: **E224**

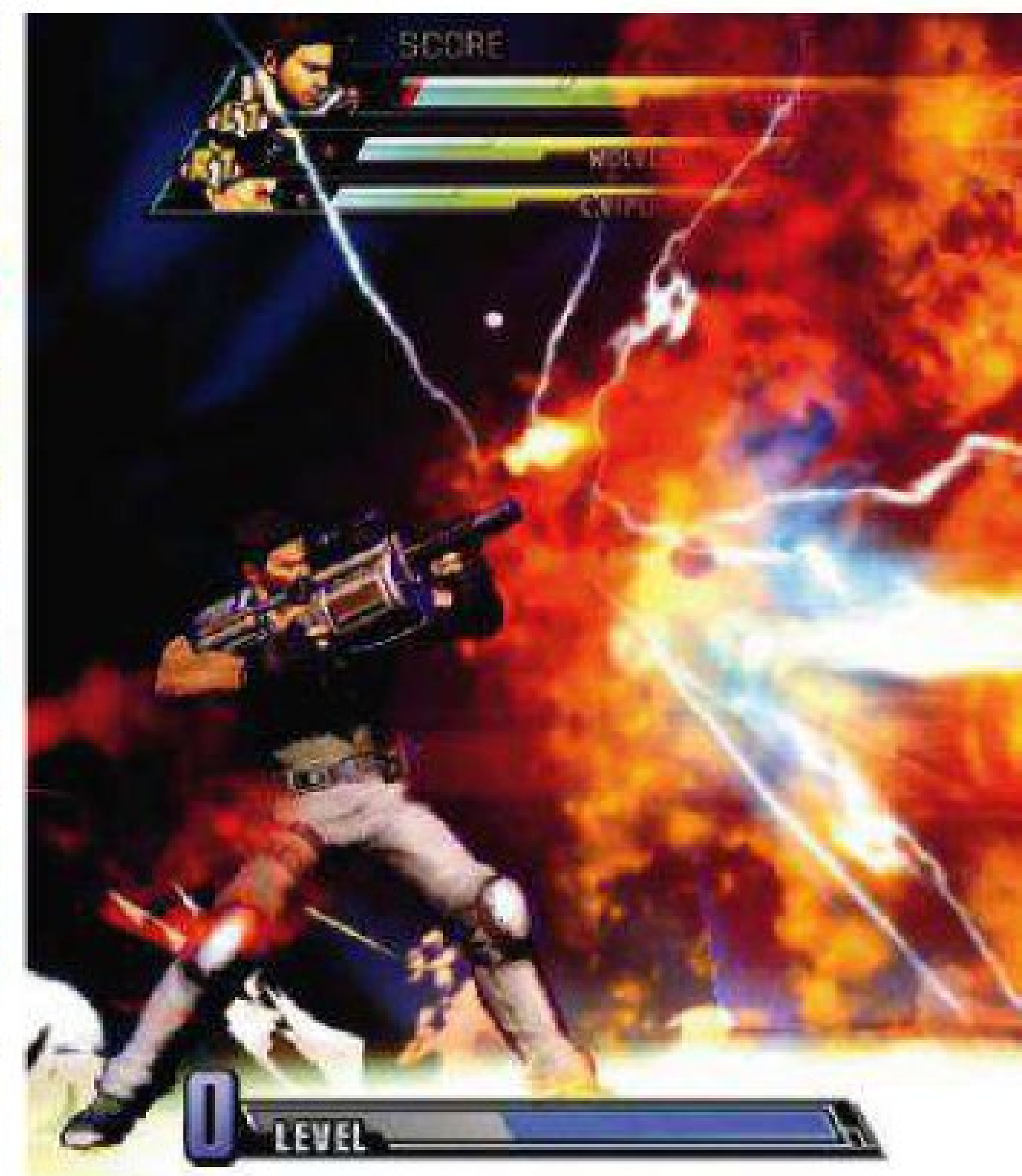
Marvel Vs Capcom 3 is one of the most disorienting games you'll encounter outside of a bullet-hell shooter. So densely packed with peripheral detail are its battles – an Asgardian unicorn here, a screen-filling rocket swarm there – that it can be difficult to actually keep track of the action. It's not an impossible task, just an unfortunate burden to bear in a genre built on economy of movement and managing power meter resources.

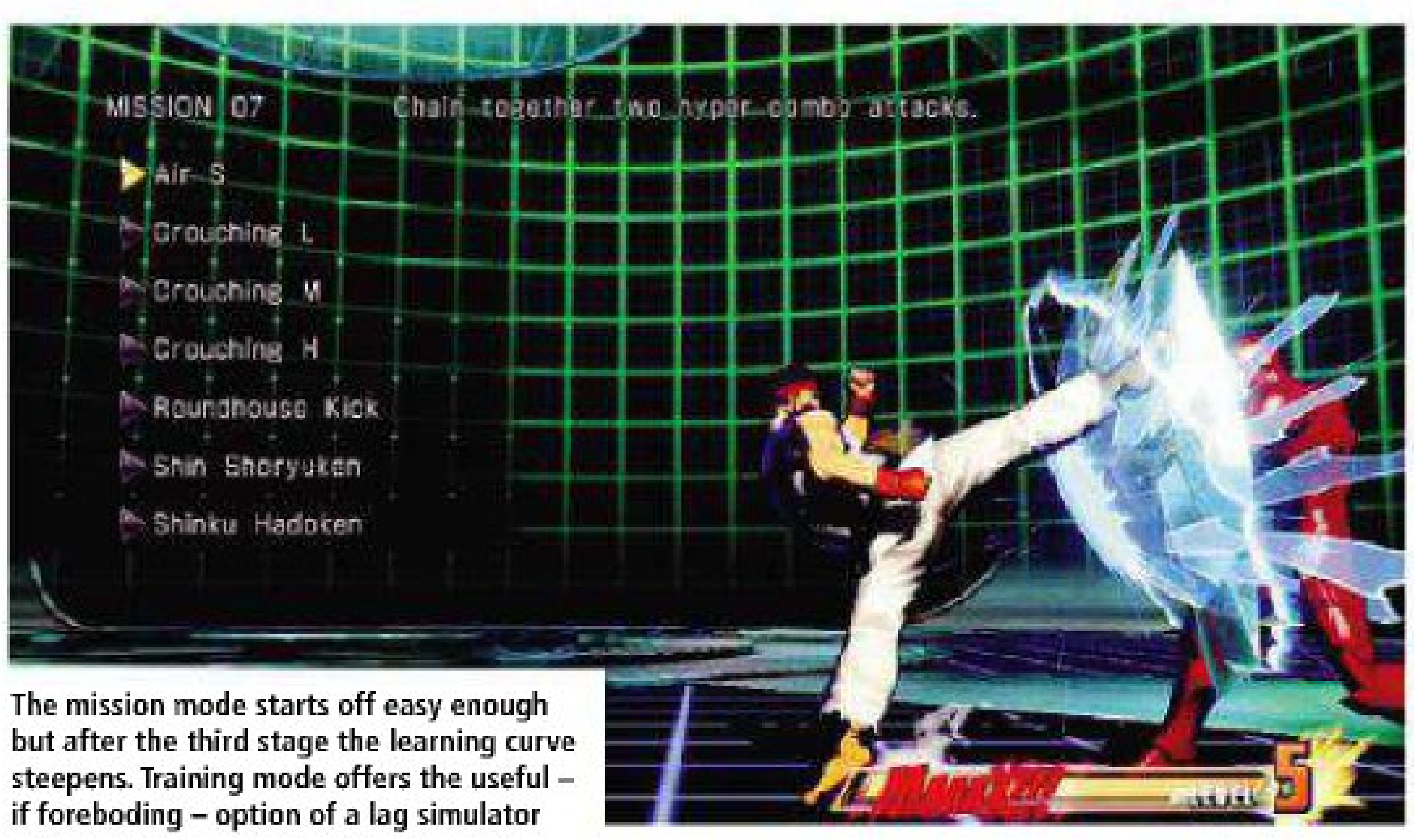
The action is thick, fast and mostly skin-deep. First-timers with the briefest knowledge of how to perform a shoryuken or press two buttons at once will regularly find success in the randomness of the fights, littered as they are with delirious special effects and bombardments of colour.





Chris Redfield (right) wields a pistol, machine-gun, grenade launcher, shotgun and flamethrower, but the spread and reach of his fire has been rightly tempered to allow counters





The mission mode starts off easy enough but after the third stage the learning curve steepens. Training mode offers the useful – if foreboding – option of a lag simulator

After a few sessions with the arcade mode the hunger for greater depth will set in. As with *MVC2*, a harsh mission mode offers the chance to rank up your profile by performing fixed move-sets, and while it shows off the potential of the fighting system, the eight-, nine- or ten-move combos aren't anything you'll be taking into battle against some of the new characters' lucky strikes. In *MVC3*, the button-basher can triumph against the odds, bestowed with celebratory finishing moves and animations.

Attacks are divided into light, mid and heavy, and though you'll expend most energy mashing the face buttons until they – or your thumbs – are broken, blocking is still a key tool. When you're backed into a corner by a gargantuan foe like Hulk or Thor, an airborne escape can work wonders, but it's a double-edged sword that can lead to your landing right in the clutches of an offscreen AI fighter. More than traditional attack/counter strategising, *MVC3* is about well-timed tagging and health-bar management. Swapping out an ailing fighter will replenish their stores, granting valuable time and energy for your army of three. There's a great deal of satisfaction in finding the right combination of fighters and feeling the curve of a battle until you hit the tagging sweet spot. In hard mode, your journey through singleplayer will at times become a merry-go-round of trial-and-error as you try to outflank and outwit the AI's trio. What's missing is a sense of weight; being capable of world-ending feats of strength at the swirl of a D-pad soon whittles away any feeling of empowerment and achievement. It would be wrong to denigrate the game too far on this point, though, regressing as it is back to the time before Yoshinori Ono rewrote the rulebook with *SFIV*. One trick *MVC3* has taken from Ono's opus, however – the extreme close-up – does more damage to

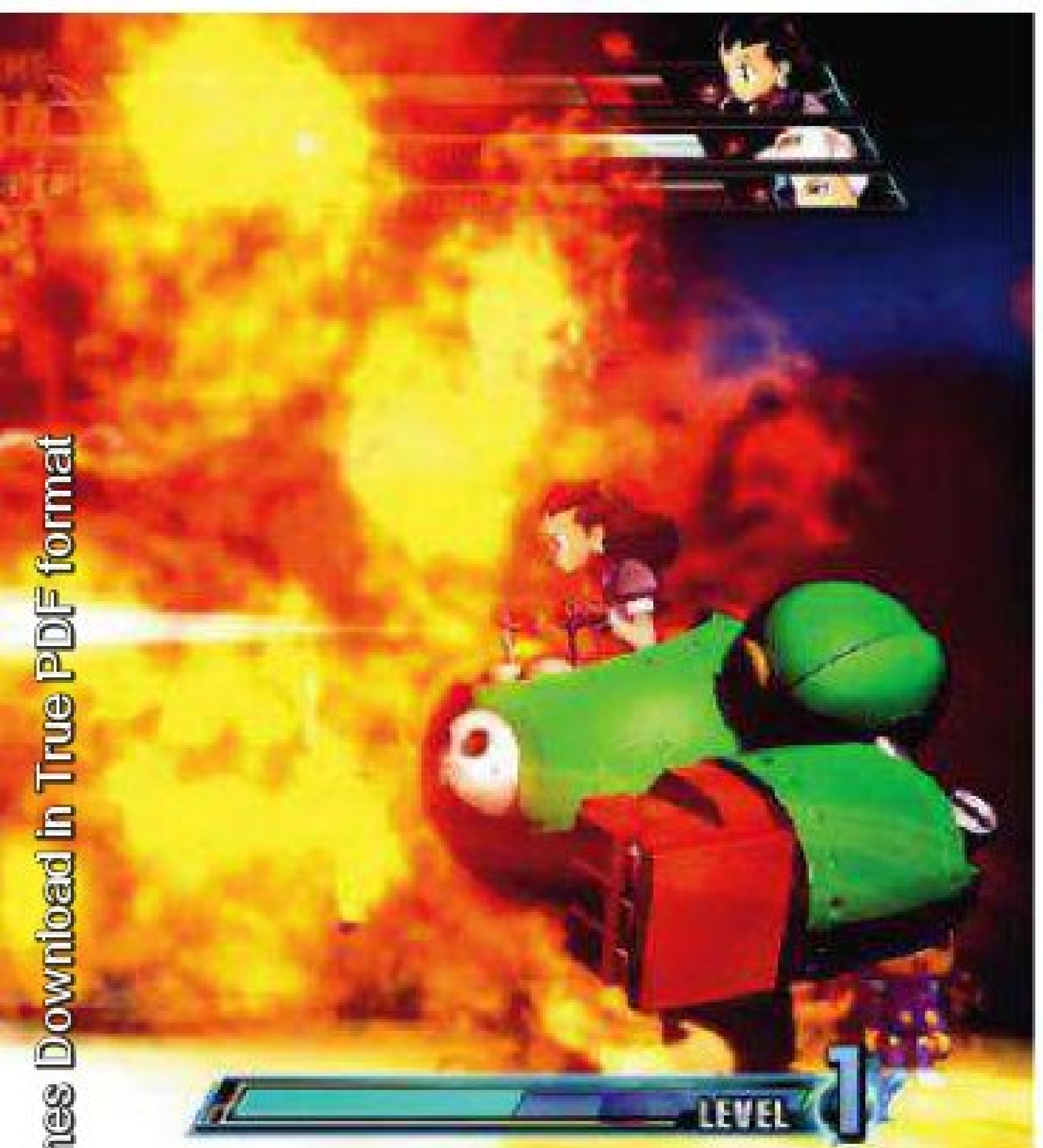






Amaterasu (above) is a welcome – if unusual – addition to the lineup, bringing all her signature animations, sounds and attacks to the table. It's possible to juggle foes with strings of super attacks, and even force rival characters to tag out

MODOK (above) is a menace to come up against, his lurching, awkward movements more like a laser-equipped shopping trolley than a worthy opponent. That his specials are so extravagant just adds to the frustration





the gameplay than good. The MT Framework engine allows the designers to add a little cinematic finesse to proceedings, zooming in to frame specials for a photo finish. The problem is that it further contributes to the visual mayhem when you're on the receiving end, confusing your spatial awareness and frequentlly leaving you waiting to find out if you threw up your guard in time.

The art team's work meets the highest of fanboy expectations. Ryu and Chun-Li are sleek ancestors of *SFIV*'s chunky champs, not cheap imitators, and the other series represented here – from *Darkstalkers* to *Resident Evil* – have an equally distinct and stylish aesthetic perfectly pitched between homage and caricature. The most satisfying and entertaining characters are those plucked from Capcom's own canon without prior exposure to the genre. That Chris Redfield's heavy weapons and Amaterasu's leaps and bounds are the highlights of the game perhaps indicate a design team liberated by what hasn't gone before rather than playing by the rulebook of its publisher's precedent. Though the cast is varied and inspired, the crying shame is that there hasn't been enough fan service paid to the otaku faithful who will likely make up a good portion of *MVC3*'s audience. There are no collectible outfits, no wacky extras, just the usual gamut of lush gallery art and bios. The stages themselves become tiresome, and the lack of meaningful rewards suggests Capcom may be banking on the ever-alluring money pit of DLC to bolster sales and keep us all keen. Salt on the wound comes courtesy of knowing winks to other branches of the two brands: glimpses of Matt Murdock in a court-room cutscene and Nick Fury scowling his hardest are a tease more than a treat. *'Fate Of Two Worlds'* suggests a narrative drive, but that's a trick, too – *MVC3*'s continuity and coherence are as flimsy as the weakest Marvel Team-Up comic, a shame considering the potential for spinoffs of this IP cross-pollination.

> There's a great deal of satisfaction in finding the right combination of fighters and feeling the curve of a battle until you hit the tagging sweet spot

With *MVC3* Capcom has extended the warranty on a brand of beat 'em up that it said farewell to with the back-to-basics, crisp beauty of *SFIV*. It may not have the longevity or depth of the greats, but as a one-shot distraction it's a whimsical wonderland that, with a little less fairy dust and a higher headcount, could enchant even the most jaded fight fan. **[7]**

Henshin a no-no



Even with your trinity of superhuman pugilists, *MVC3*'s final boss, Galactus, is an absolute nightmare to take on at any difficulty above easy. Not only does the purple planet-eater take up most of the screen, but his ability to dole out devastating combos at the slap of a hand renders your team ill-equipped to deal. Of all the beat 'em up villains of the past, Galactus' propensity for dirty rotten tricks recalls *Dead Or Alive 4*'s Tengu – a treacherous memory for any who braved his crazy-faced killing. Even for an intergalactic slave-master, Galactus tests the nerves.



OKAMIDEN

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: MARCH 18 PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E216



Using Chibi's brush powers uses up his supply of ink. Unlike his mother's, Chibiterasu's ink stock doesn't regenerate over time (unless you pick the novice option when starting a game)

Okamiden blurs the line between sequel and remake. A new protagonist, a new plot and (one or two) new powers should make these things clear cut, but Capcom's follow-up to Clover Studio's watercolour masterpiece almost reverentially pays tribute to the original game. Playing as divine wolf pup Chibiterasu, offspring of Amaterasu, *Okami*'s sun goddess incarnate, players must retrace mother's paw prints – journeying across the same environments, meeting many of the same characters, and saving the very same land of Nippon from a new host of demonic threats.

It's hard to begrudge the recycling – especially when there's enough imagination in *Okamiden*'s original elements to fill a host of lesser games. More importantly, there's something ritualistic in returning to *Okami*'s painterly world – fitting for a story so self-consciously styled as a legend, and for a series so steeped in Shinto myth. There's nostalgia value, too – 2008 may not have been that long ago, but there hasn't since then been a title so suffused with character as *Okami*. Visiting it again is a joy – one on which *Okamiden* plays for maximum effect.

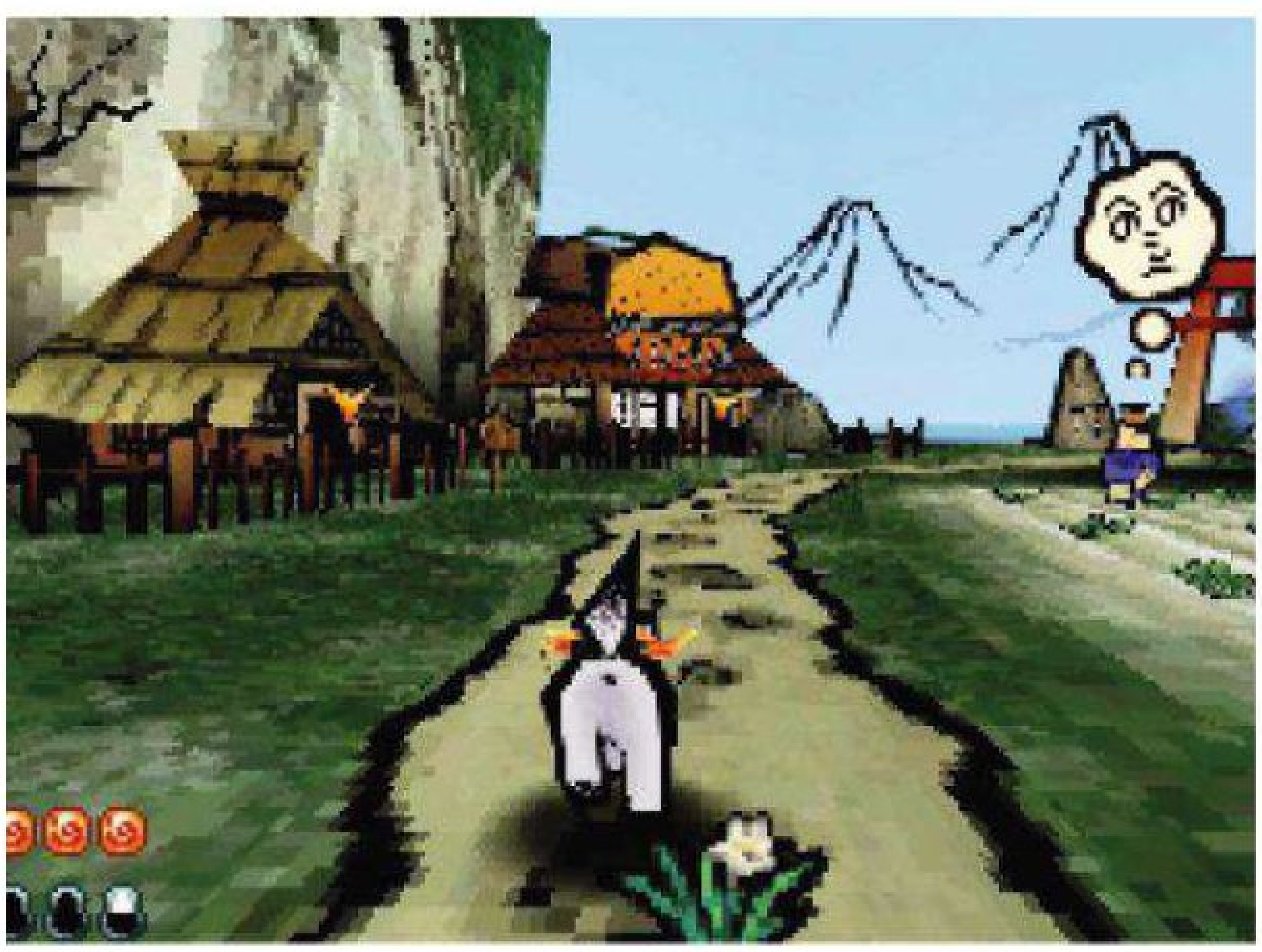


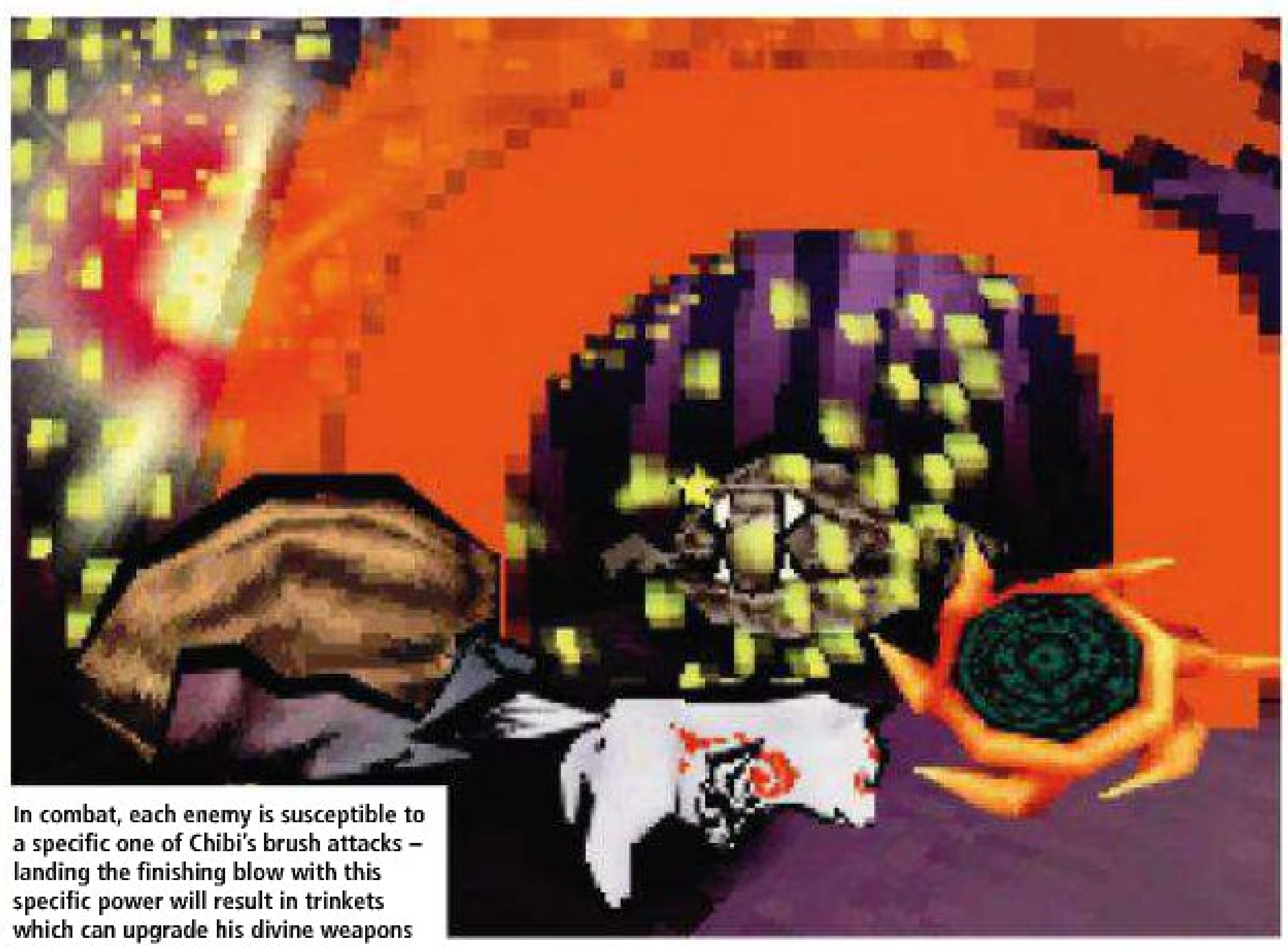
The larger enemies are sumptuous, especially the bosses. In combat, your allies will aid you automatically as an extension to Chibiterasu's own combat. Each has its own set of moves

A good thing too, because, as lovely as *Okamiden* is, it's impossible to ignore the fact that it's mechanically and technically inferior to Clover's game. Squeezing *Okami*'s visual style onto DS has come at some cost – that parchment filter's gone, for a start, but more importantly the technical issues that occasionally irked in the first game are more severe here. Areas you recognise from the first game have been chopped into loading-screen-separated chunks. Slowdown is a frequent annoyance – a hectic chase scene relatively early on slows things to a crawl – and character models fade in and out remarkably close by. It's worth it, though, because *Okamiden* is still a beautiful game. There's less fine detail in the character models this time – as if they were painted with a thicker brush – but the sight of a delicately sketched mountain on a pastel-blue horizon is still an inspiring one.

More compromising are changes to how the game plays. The elegant control scheme of Nintendo's DS *Zelda* titles, which manage to squeeze a variety of moves and a full inventory of items on to the stylus alone, has not been replicated here. Instead, players navigate with the D-pad – touchscreen buttons allow some camera control, though it copes well alone – switching to the stylus when Chibi's celestial brush techniques come into play. Most of the time this isn't too irksome, though in combat some fussy stylus shuffling is necessary. The mechanics of battling have also been simplified – Chibi has one attack button to his mother's two – though the battles themselves work in much the same way as before – whisking the wolf to enclosed arenas to fight small packs of demonic foes, most of which require a mix of buttons and brushwork to defeat.

The brush techniques have not only made the transition to DS entirely intact, but – due to the stylus – have gained a literal tactility





In combat, each enemy is susceptible to a specific one of Chibi's brush attacks – landing the finishing blow with this specific power will result in trinkets which can upgrade his divine weapons

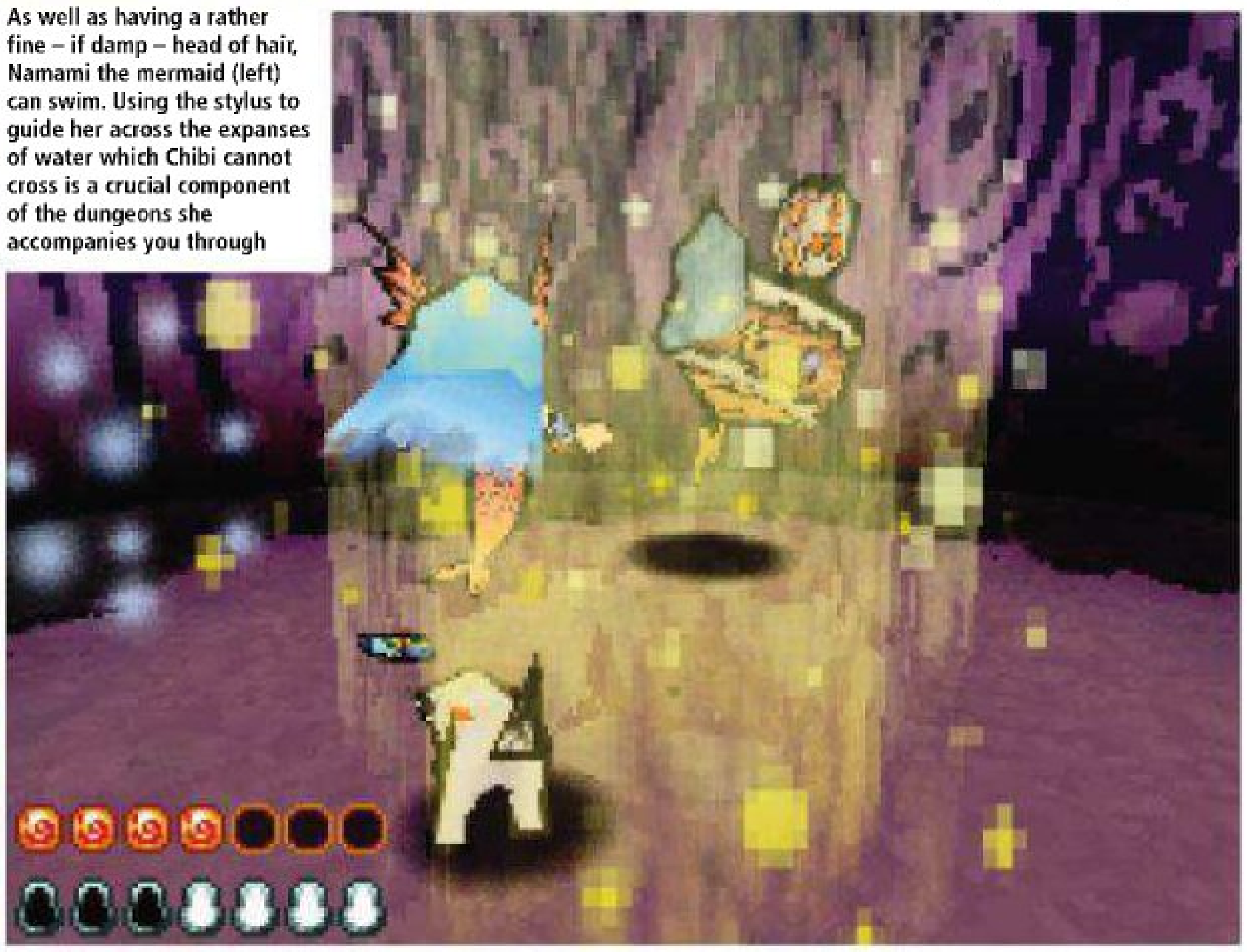




A side effect of the picturesque nature of *Okamiden*'s visuals is that you really do feel the impact of journeying through a dark, dank and overcast cursed zone. Returning these locations to their natural splendour is a pleasure







As well as having a rather fine – if damp – head of hair, Namami the mermaid (left) can swim. Using the stylus to guide her across the expanses of water which Chibi cannot cross is a crucial component of the dungeons she accompanies you through

Praise be



As with the first game, one of Chibiterasu's major tasks is bringing life back to the natural world. One of the first brush techniques players learn is the bloom ability, which can rejuvenate dead plants as well as wipe away the darkness from cursed zones. The reward for doing this is a flurry of cherry blossom as the previously blackened wood is restored, and a unit of 'praise' (experience). *Okamiden* repeats the first game's trick of only awarding praise for completing quests and tasks like these, meaning there's no need to grind through protracted battling against monsters in the field.

which could only be heightened by playing the game with a pot of ink to one side. Pressing the right shoulder button freezes the action, as well as bumping it from the top screen to the lower, where players are free to scrawl across the now sepia-toned scene. Powers are based on defined shapes and patterns (a horizontal line is a slash, a circle with a line through it conjures a bomb) and almost all will be entirely familiar to players of the first game since they're even handed out in much the same order as before. As a way of making Chibiterasu's divine powers tangible, the brushwork has lost none of its impact, but a few more new abilities would have found a grateful audience.

Most of the new powers which do appear relate to Chibiterasu's companions. Across the course of his adventure, the pup teams up with a selection of youngsters who – like the chatterbox sprite Issun from the first game – function as Chibi's interlocutors as well as also providing support in battle. Many have abilities which can be used in the field, too – Chibi can draw water from the hair of mermaid companion Nanami, for example – and all can dismount from the wolf before being directed – à la *Spirit Tracks* – with the stylus. *Okamiden*'s dungeons are almost all built around such teamwork, though a few too many of its puzzles hinge on 'you do that switch and I'll do this one'.

The chapters marked by the departure and arrival of Chibi's young friends provide the only real structure to *Okamiden*'s story which, like that of its predecessor, is a gloriously disconnected, episodic journey through both the minds of its creators and Japanese mythology. Along with the return trips Chibiterasu makes to the villages and townships his mother visited, *Okamiden* shows the player many surreal and beautiful sights of its own, and not knowing where the game intends to take you next is the main incentive to keep playing.

> Along with the trips Chibiterasu makes to areas his mother visited, Okamiden shows the player many surreal and beautiful sights of its own

With its reuse of powers, locations and mechanics, and an engine that often creaks under their combined pressure, *Okamiden* constantly invites direct comparisons with the original game. But whereas a more comprehensive reimagining of how *Okami* would work on DS could have resulted in a less ambitious, more polished game, *Okamiden* succeeds in preserving both the spirit and form of its forebear, and that makes it rather special indeed. **[8]**





Your adventure will see you returning to Yakashu village more than once – a side-quest sees you directing lost and lonely NPCs to the settlement. It beats many other side-quests, which can be dull collectathons



MINDJACK

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: FEELPLUS



Boss battles are often so illogical that they may as well feature a troupe of bananas making off with your shopping, vulnerable only to the bus times in braille



'Wandering' by leaving your character's body is dangerous, not least because it puts your precious hero under the control of the AI

Bit trip



Beyond the usual drip-feed of Achievements and Trophies, the carrot for players who stick with *MindJack* is a straightforward levelling system which unlocks a wide range of player modifications. Split into 'Rules' and 'Arts', these 'Plug-Ins' range from the simple (increased speed, stamina, hack recharge, etc) to the unorthodox (gain XP for simply wandering around without a body, for example). It's a neat idea that deserves a stronger foundation. As it is, they're less plug-ins than just plugs, stopping the holes and redressing the balancing issues which make the vanilla game such a chore to play. And because you can never equip enough of them at once, at best you'll end up with just a minor headache.

A subsidiary of Japan's AQ Interactive, background figure in the making of *Lost Odyssey* and co-developer of the dreadful *Ninety-Nine Nights II*, Feelplus only has itself to blame for *MindJack*, which sounds like a movie starring Clint Howard's stunt double. It's a flashback to the early days of Xbox 360, when Japanese action games felt less like platform support than acts of industrial sabotage. Its idea of merging solo, co-op and deathmatch combat into a single mode is as noncommittal as its story, which merges decades-old cyberpunk clichés into one appalling mess.

The concept will be familiar to players of n-Space's *Geist* – another game in which your disembodied character hops between people and objects, sharing those abilities in multiplayer. The twist in *MindJack* is that it occurs seamlessly in single hybrid mode, and that most possessions end with the desire to jump straight back out of the host and continue out of the game entirely, all the way back to wherever you left the receipt.

Part of the problem is that the combat and control systems, wholesale imports from *Gears Of War*, appear to have broken in transit. Many of the cover points have no defensive value whatsoever, bullets whizzing either through them or around what should never have been a cover point in the first place. The charmless weapons (pistol, sniper rifle, rocket launcher and so on) have identical reload animations, with even missiles emerging from your character's pocket. The thoughtless map design and damage model turn picking up ammo – every ten seconds – into Russian roulette.

All of which, you'd be forgiven for thinking, could be a subversive cue to leave your current body and find a faster, stronger or otherwise advantageous one. But which to choose? The nondescript soldier? The shambling bullet sponge with the shotgun? The assault drone with the horrible controls? The riot shield on wheels? Surely not the robot gorilla? There are, in fact, few creative options and even fewer enjoyable ones, the worst of all being to play the game alone. Bad AI bots are a dime a dozen, but when you recruit them by brainwashing a fallen enemy, an ennui seems to come over them that makes them little more than decoys.

No one, in fact – developer included – seems to know quite how to handle the inconvenience of *MindJack*. Bosses turn up with what appears to be a plan, but either leave before betraying any kind of weak spot or commit suicide when you've killed a few more foot soldiers; at best, they just succumb to sustained fire. As for other players, they seemed in short supply in this retail build, reviewed during its first week of release. Every now and then they dropped in and turned a bad campaign into bad team deathmatch. Then – as if not entirely happy with that choice – they left. **[3]**





Jacking a robot gorilla (left) lets you share its bemusement about why it's there. The opening (right) sees you walk in a line before a cutscene worthy of Jason Bourne


StoreMags.com
"Innovative and courageous..."
GoreZone magazine
DESTINYQUEST
BOOK 1
THE LEGION of SHADOW
A GAME OF STRATEGY BY MICHAEL J. WARD
PURE GAMING... IN A BOOK
3 CLASSES 15 CAREERS 400 ITEMS 130 SPECIAL ABILITIES
www.destiny-quest.com



3,323,84
GAMES AND COUNTING
7
www.pegi.info
LittleBIG Planet 2
THE WHOLE WORLD IS CREATING GAMES FOR YOU.
Rio Carnival Dance-Off
created by Wexfordian
Rogue Panda Rescue
created by Jackofcourse
Venice is Sinking!
created by GruntosUK
BREAKING NEWS
LITTLEBIGPLANET 2 LETS PEOPLE ALL OVER THE WORLD PLAY, CREATE AND SHARE ANYTHING THEY CAN IMAGINE.
FROM RACERS TO PUZZLERS, PLATFORMERS TO SHOOTERS – MORE POSSIBILITIES THAN EVER BEFORE!
THE GAME IS JUST THE START. LITTLEBIGPLANET.COM
PS3
PlayStation 3
SONY
make.believe



There are wave-survival challenge modes too. It's a good way to bone up on spells, and discover new ones; upon expiry, toothsome treasure chests (carried on lots of little legs) spit out scrolls of handy spell combinations



You'll come across a variety of off-hand weapons you wield by shift-clicking – swords, maces, hammers and an absurdly overpowered gun. It's quite easy to pick them up accidentally, and you can't swap back





MAGICKA

FORMAT: PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** PARADOX INTERACTIVE
DEVELOPER: ARROWHEAD GAME STUDIOS

Arrowhead Game Studios has no truck with Peter Molyneux's 'one button' fantasy for the future of videogame combat. Though on the surface it's a splattery thirdperson hack'n'slasher, *Magicka* requires a commanding knowledge of the keyboard – or at least the left half of it. In terms of challenge, think *Mavis Beacon Does Diablo*, only here one of the longer words you can spell is 'qfasa' and summons a goblin-gibbing lightning bolt from the sky.

Flight sims may have more intimidating keybindings, but the speed of recall needed here keeps step with the most frantic of hack'n'slash games. As a wizard, your main form of attack is to combine some of the eight magical elements (plus a choice of mouse buttons and occasionally spacebar) into a deadly spell – and you'll need to do this for every lightning bolt that sizzles from your fingertips.

It's a complex system and perhaps that's how spellcasting should feel. In any case, the flipside is the ludicrous variety of spells to be derived from blending the eight together. Mix water and frost elements and you can spit out a cluster of ice shards with a tap of the right mouse button. Mix the arcane element with a shield element and you conjure a number of explosive eggs that act like mines. More complex combinations call in a kamikaze phoenix, slow down time or see zombies claw their way up through the soil to join you in battle.

It's not just giddy, chaotic creation, either: with enemies who are susceptible to certain elements there is a tactical necessity to think about spellcraft. You may find *BioShock* has a few things to teach you regarding an amassed enemy standing in a body of water, while deft deployment of a shield spell can be used to bounce your arcane laser attack into the weak spot of a heavily armoured foe. More often than not, though, it's a muddle of key hammering and particle effects that get you through – and with the mayhem onscreen, it's hard to see which elements you have summoned, ready to be cast either on yourself or an enemy, depending on your chosen mouse button. Fat fingers will betray you: healing yourself having accidentally spliced your magic with a dose of lightning or arcana does little more than cauterise the wound.

Luckily, *Magicka* is a game designed principally around co-op. While this exponentially raises the level of carnage, as players unwittingly ignite each other in maelstroms of eldritch flame, it also means there's someone on hand to resurrect you.



The game introduces some variables, periodically throwing wave survival at you, or forcing you into fighting within constrained arenas. The above instance, in which you defend an airship from goblin pirates, could get rather messy with four players, we imagine

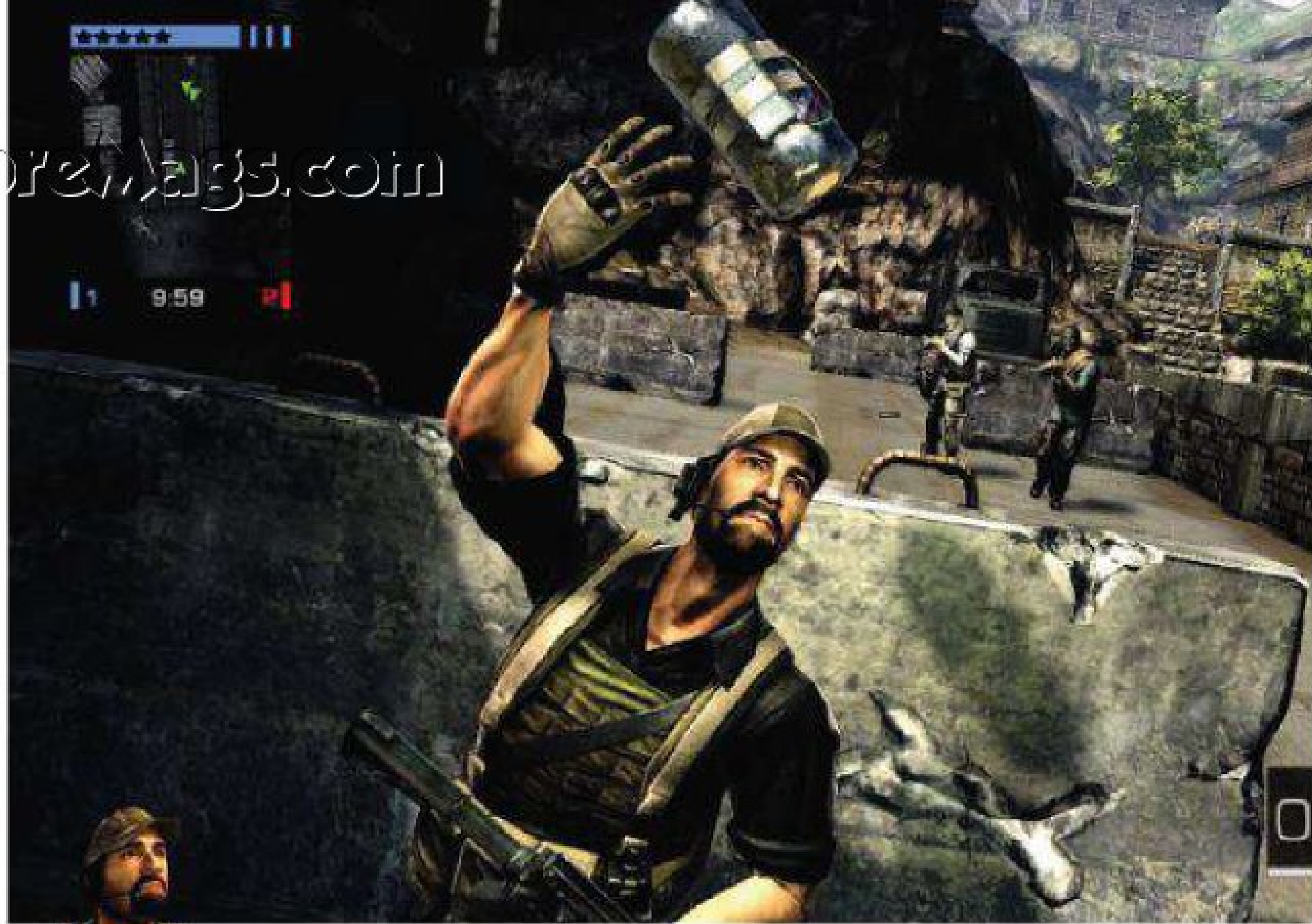
It's hard to imagine it will be coherent with four players onscreen, without strict discipline being imposed: it's crowded with just two – which was the maximum that we managed to squeeze past the extremely creaky netcode. The game has gone from closed beta to release with unexpected and imprudent haste: our build wasn't fit for public consumption, and even after a spate of frantic post-launch patches, a panoply of minor glitches and showstopping bugs remain. It's hard to excuse.

Yet a more obviously persistent problem is that the game's tendency towards screen-blitzing mayhem, which, combined with dimwitted AI and fiddlesome controls, stops it rising above slapstick. Does it matter? *Magicka* delivers splashy nonsense of a gleeful kind, and somehow its delight in chaos and willful stupidity buoys it some way above its faults. Matched with a cheeky, flippant tone, the game's draw proves not just its spells but its charm. **[7]**

Vlad tidings

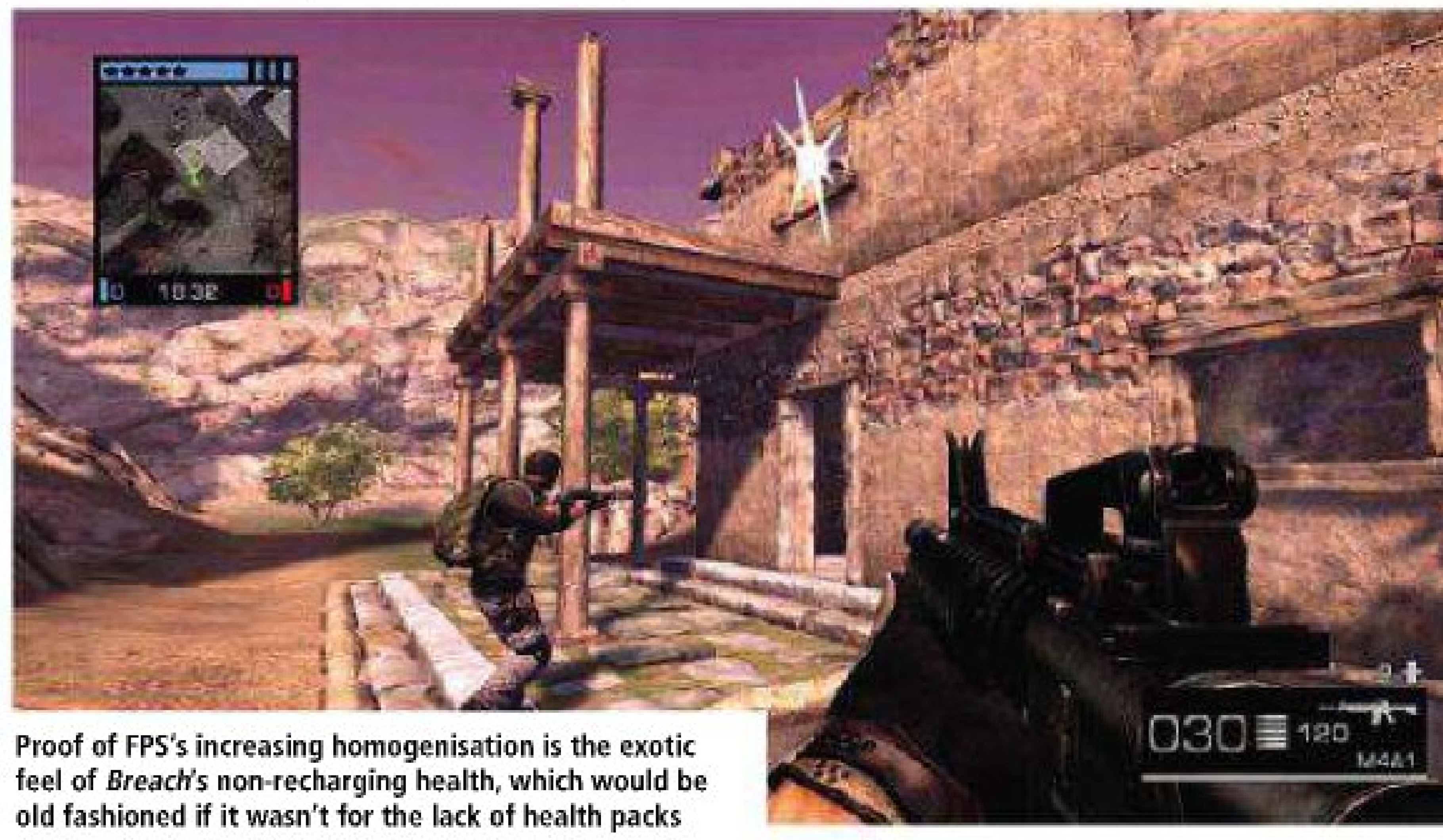


You can turn enemies into fountains of offal – everybody likes that – but jokes are altogether more divisive thing in videogames. No wonder most opt for the sort of softball comedy usually acted out on mid-afternoon TV by vibrantly coloured sock puppets. *Magicka* is no exception, so we have Tolkien puns, village names that sound like rude words and an overly theatrical mentor who repeatedly emphasises the fact he's not a vampire (punchline: he is a vampire). It's all harmless stuff, and delivered with a touching warmth, but the funniest part of the game is when nominally cooperative players blow each other to bits.





Breach's indistinct setting isn't helped by crude detailing and jaggy, overcooked, rim-lighting-infested rendering. The biggest XP rewards are for those who return canisters to the drop-off points in Retrieval, making it likely to be the most popular mode, even if Convoy mode more successfully exercises *Breach*'s strengths



Proof of FPS's increasing homogenisation is the exotic feel of *Breach*'s non-recharging health, which would be old fashioned if it wasn't for the lack of health packs



BREACH

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ATOMIC GAMES **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE

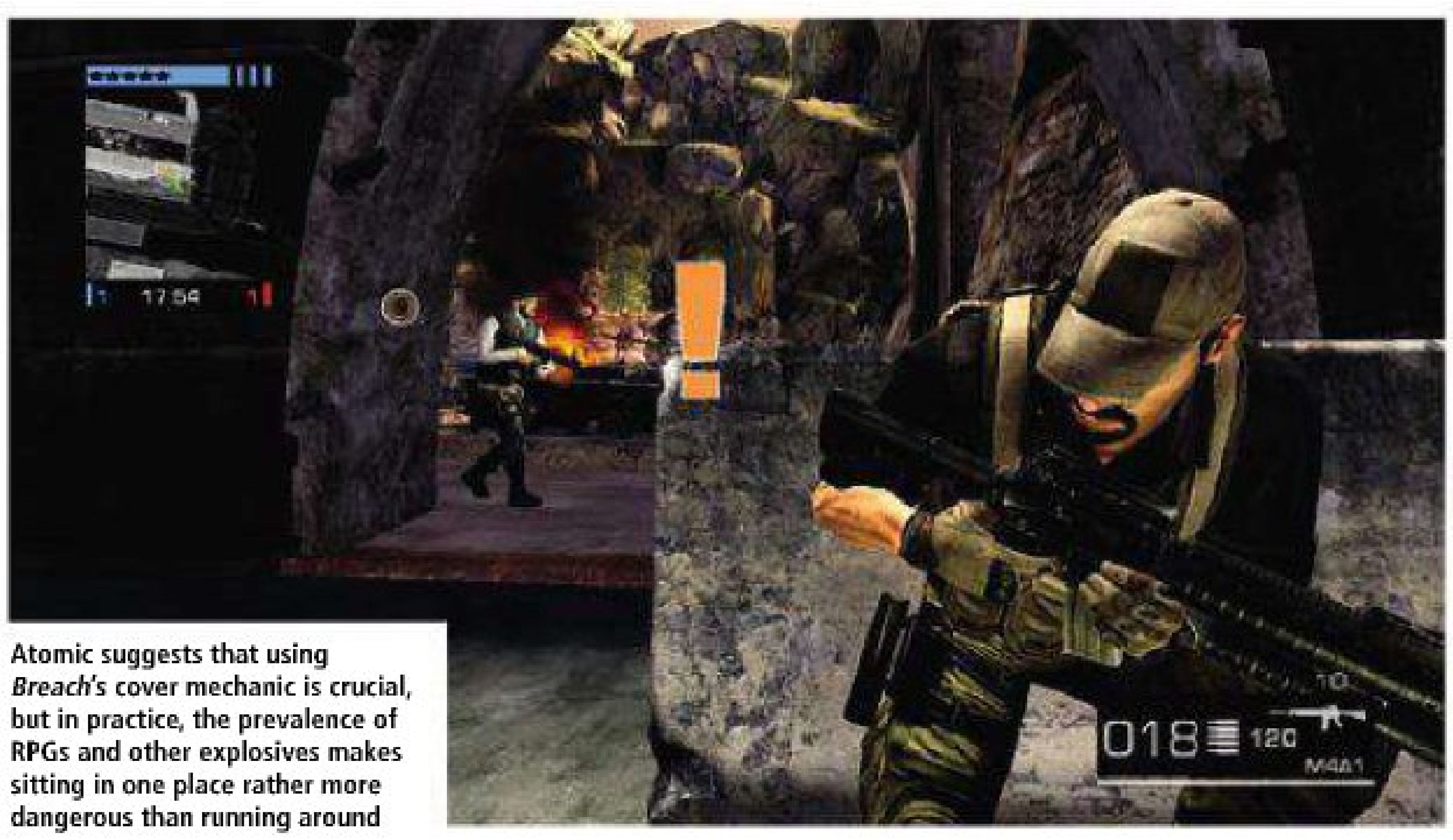
Atomic Games moved from creating *Six Days In Fallujah* to this, a team-based multiplayer shooter. One is an attempt to create a deeply realistic military shooter from a scenario that's based on real and recent events; the other is feature-rich but thematically anonymous, built on the foundations of tens of FPS forerunners. One poses fascinating questions about the representation of war and reality in videogames; the other seems destined to play only the most minor role in the future of gaming's military theatre.

It's not that *Breach* lacks a USP – it has a 'destruction toolbox' to cater to that, even if *Battlefield: Bad Company* already has one. Various structures on its three maps are destructible – you can splinter apart the slatted walls of wooden shacks with your bullets, blow holes in weakened concrete with C4, and decimate bridges with RPGs. The aim is that you use demolition tactically: by blowing away cover and taking out the supports of structures in which your enemies are sheltering, you can gain an advantage over the course of a match. But the combination of large, open maps and vulnerability under fire makes flattening buildings with enemies still in them an overly risky flourish, not to mention the fact that only certain elements can be affected. Accordingly, XP and objectives are better earned through conventional means, although it's often a good idea to take up a single-shot RPG – which can be collected from limited arms caches – and destroy mounted guns that command views over tactically important areas.

It's a pity that not all of the modes demand such rigour. Retrieval has both teams striving to collect a bioweapon canister and deliver it at one of a couple of drop-off points. The random locations of canister and drop-off, combined with the asymmetrical nature of the maps, make understanding what's going on difficult, and therefore it's hard to plan destruction. Infiltration, a point-capture mode, is too tit-for-tat to demand long-term thinking. But much better is Convoy mode, a fine little FPS innovation that has one team support a convoy of trucks to get to the end of the roads running through three of the maps before the timer runs out. The methodical progression, in tandem with the need of the defending team to be close to the convoy to make it progress – while C4-ing obstructions and repairing vehicles – gives both teams ample opportunity to plan and use the strategies at hand.

Though it doesn't come with a singleplayer campaign, this XBLA title still provides a generous package, backed by the standards of team deathmatch and Sole Survivor (no respawns, last man standing) modes, five player classes and a spread of gadgets, perks and weapon upgrades. But it's all in the the face of *Breach*'s most serious problem: its feel. It's as if Atomic has paid almost no attention to player feedback. Not sensing the damage you're imparting and receiving makes skirmishes seem arbitrary (you'll rely on the HUD reporting your XP wins to know you've taken out enemies at long range), while explosions – in a game based on destruction – pack no punch.

It's therefore hard to see *Breach*'s part in a world in which most of its market already owns and plays the likes of *COD*, *Halo*, *Team Fortress 2* and *Counter-Strike* – each of which boasts more depth and provides more reward. As such, it's sad that a developer with as much ambition and boldness as the one that made *Six Days In Fallujah* should release this pale trifle. **[5]**



Atomic suggests that using *Breach*'s cover mechanic is crucial, but in practice, the prevalence of RPGs and other explosives makes sitting in one place rather more dangerous than running around

Perking up

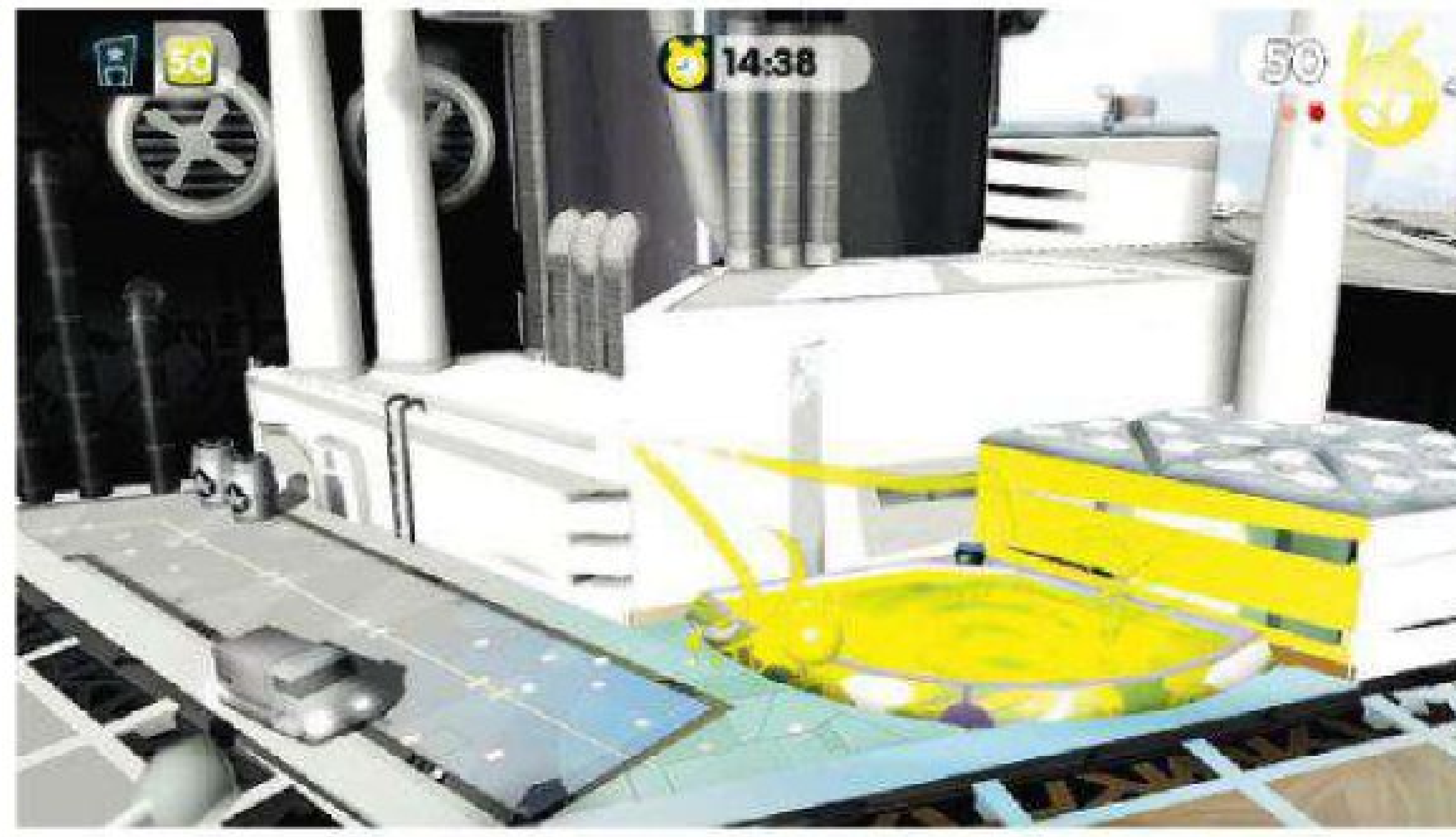


New players will find themselves at the mercy of that modern scourge: a perks system. *Breach*'s five classes, from the slow and tough machine-gun-toting Gunner to the weaker, faster Recon (unlocked by skilling up a couple of the other classes first), can be customised with a system of upgrades. These include gadgets such as the Sabotage Kit, with which you can rig weapons caches and mounted guns to explode when an enemy uses them, and the Sonic Imager, which enables you to see through walls.

Weapons can be upgraded to incorporate the likes of scope and grenade launcher attachments, and perks include faster reload and running speed, body armour, better sprint endurance and blindfire from cover. Sure, they encourage role specialisation and give a sense of progression, but it's never fun to get massacred by players who've simply earned more XP than you.



Though the environments' monochrome beginnings unavoidably look alike, even when coloured in they get a little over-familiar, but things take a pleasant sci-fi twist at the halfway point





DE BLOB 2

FORMAT: 360, DS, PS3 (VERSION TESTED), WII RELEASE: FEBRUARY 25
PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: BLUE TONGUE PREVIOUSLY IN: E222



Points gathered in-game can be redeemed for upgrades at select locations (left) or from the main menu. They're a key to survival rather than a cursory addition, and become the difference between success and defeat

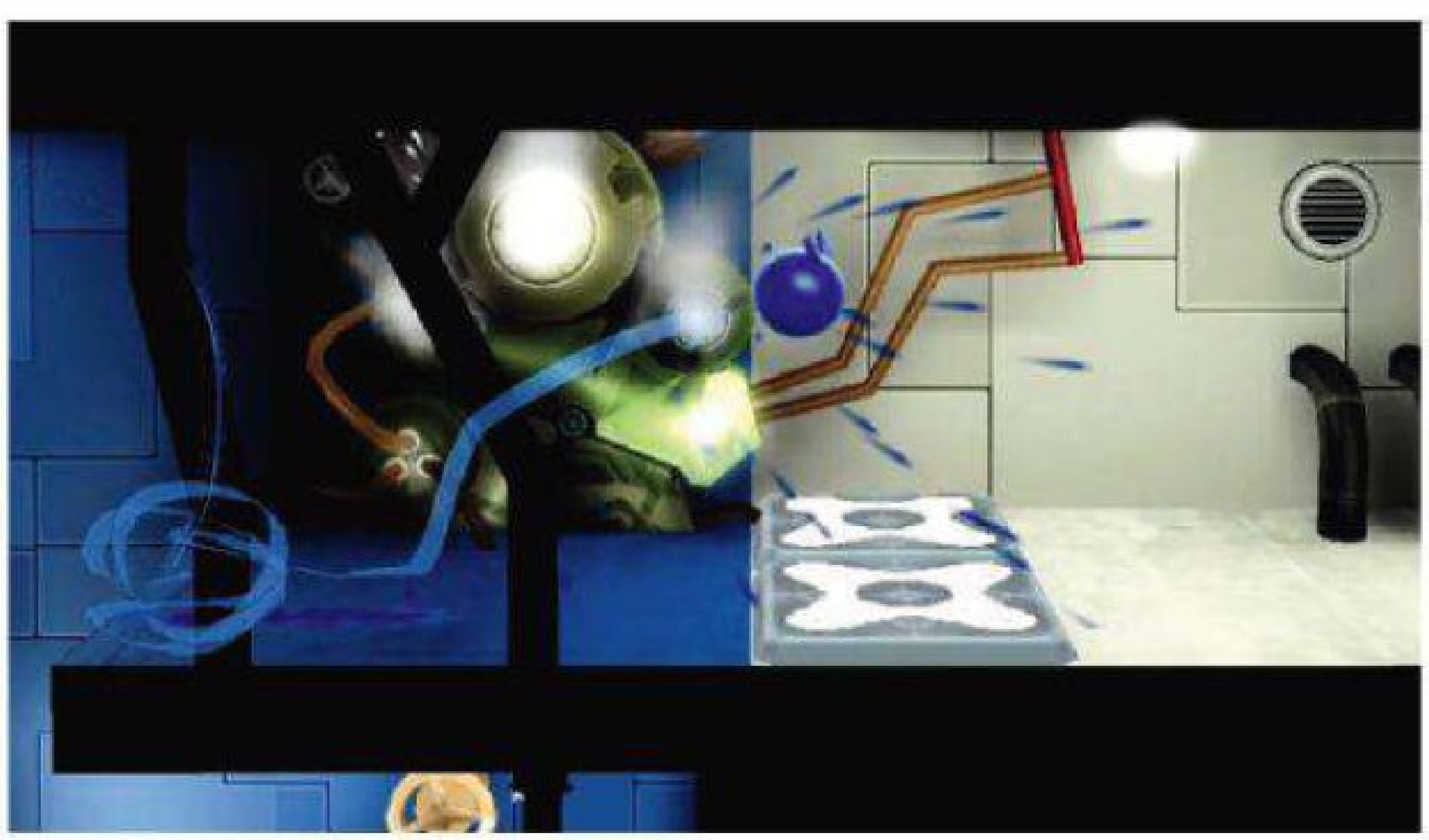
Platforming sequels were taken to school by Nintendo's moustached mascot last year, and though *De Blob 2* has some similar tricks up its sleeve – 2D sections, a more varied pace and move-set – it's the memory of *Super Mario Sunshine* that the game brings to mind on first contact. The world of *De Blob*, filled with jibber-jabbering characters that wouldn't look out of place on Isle Delfino, brims with the sort of personality rarely found outside of a Nick Park animation and wins your affections before the adventure has properly begun.

The mission is the same as before: colour in the monochromatic locales with your rotund hero and free the populace from the grip of your nemesis. Rolling Blob around town and scaling the heights of urban sprawls is as intuitive as ever, with Blue Tongue taking heed of previous criticisms by mapping jump to a face button on the Move (instead of a flick). A new emphasis on platforming occasionally leads to frustration, however, and the controls take time to gel as the Move button, trigger and Navigation Controller shoulder button combinations required to lock on, dash and attack can be easily confused. Once mastered, though, you'll feel like the king of the miniature world you're tasked to colourise.

The level design delivers a solid set of paced thrills, and though the mission structure gets repetitive (colour in a set of buildings, smash a set of enemies, repeat), the developer adds replay value with multiplayer and bonus missions. Following further in Mario's footsteps, a second user can now play along through the main game, acting as a point-and-shoot accomplice capable of holding colours in reserve and wiping out enemies on Blob's behalf. It's a worthwhile addition that's shamefully underused, the second player given little to do when the action switches to 2D.

The main game's cycles of gameplay are predictable, but the 2D platforming interludes are far from it. A mixed bag of good ideas (get required colours through a gauntlet of contaminating inks and cleansing showers) and volatile difficulty, their unpredictable challenge sits awkwardly with the game's time-attack nature.

De Blob 2 accelerates with ideas but stalls with execution. This sequel isn't the leap forward the concept deserves, but it's testament to the original that it remains a standout personality over two years on, at a point when quality platform games have become thin on the ground. **[8]**

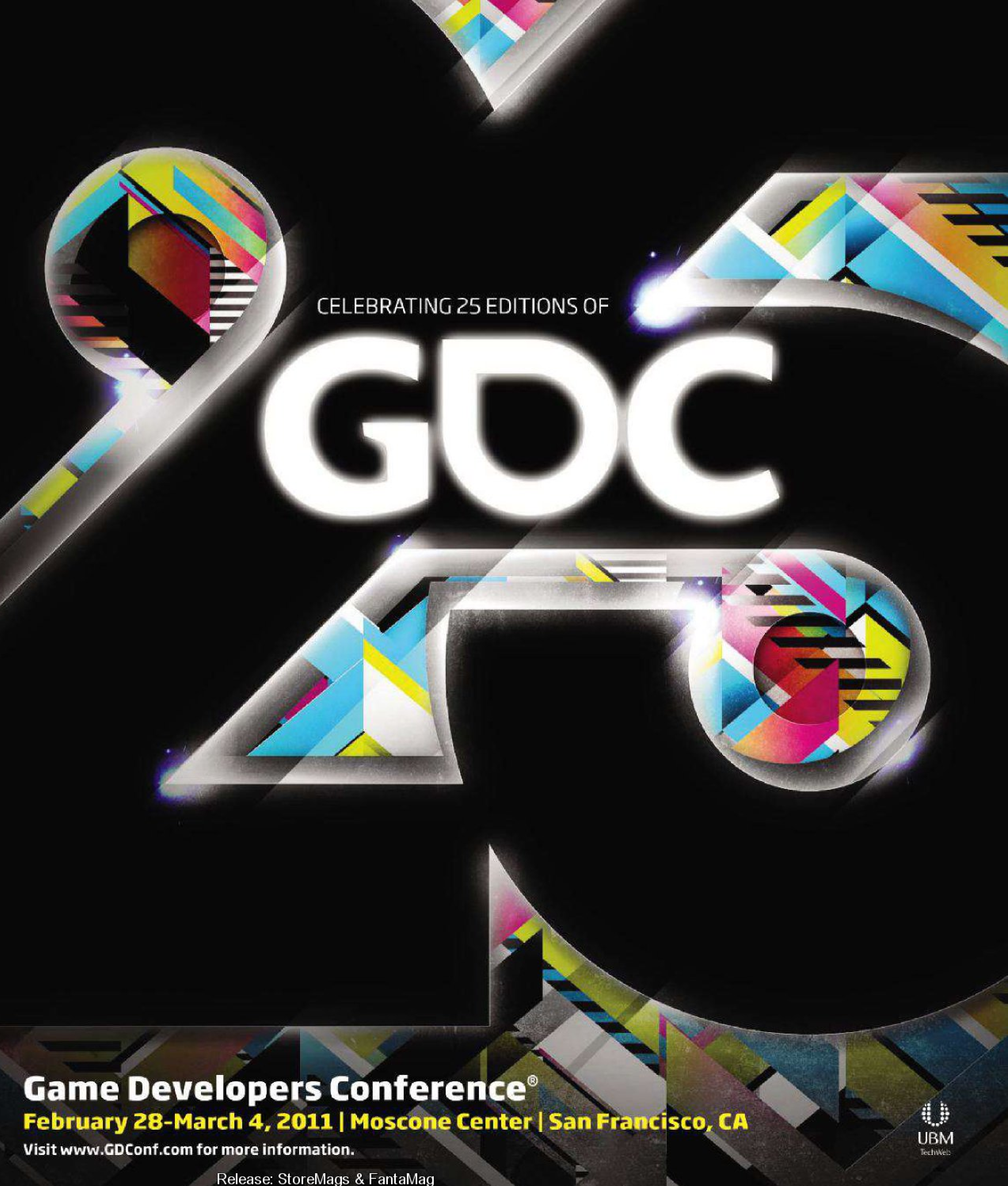


Splish-splashing away with Blob is fun enough – he handles like *Metroid*'s morph ball and zips around thanks to launchpads that send him flying. His sidekick (and co-op partner) Pinky grants special pick-ups as the game progresses

A blob and his boys



The cast of characters – all without comprehensible dialogue – are bright, bouncy balls of energy. Characters like skater boy Zip pop in and out of your adventure with kooky one-liners and a dose of pizzazz that adds a sense of camaraderie to Blob's journey. The plot itself is oddly engaging, too. It begins with a manhunt for the missing Comrade Black, but things take a nastier turn when Blob finds a cult of colourless crazies overrunning the world which he soon unearths as something much more… corporate. It's a strangely adult narrative for such an innocent-looking game, and makes a change from princesses in pink dresses.


CELEBRATING 25 EDITIONS OF
GDC
Game Developers Conference®
February 28-March 4, 2011 | Moscone Center | San Francisco, CA
Visit www.GDConf.com for more information.
UBM
TechWeb





KNIGHTS CONTRACT

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 RELEASE: FEBRUARY 25
PUBLISHER: NAMCO BANDAI DEVELOPER: GAME REPUBLIC
PREVIOUSLY IN: E218

'B*ayonetta* meets *Ico*' sounds like the sort of idea that should get quickly folded up into a paper aeroplane and launched gracefully into a nearby bin. But some catastrophic oversight at an early brainstorming session seems to have left Game Republic trying to jam an awkward protect-the-girl mechanic into an otherwise chaotic brawler. The combination proves phenomenally irritating. Were *Knights Contract* stripped of this major imperfection, it would have simply been a largely unimaginative also-ran action adventure with undercooked graphics, erratic production design, often-clumsy execution and a terrible story. Instead, the game can't help but prod this sore point like a loose tooth – and the result is a mouthful of swearwords.

You play the improbably proportioned Heinrich, an executioner who has been 'cursed' with immortality. Together with Gretchen, a friendly witch, you must put an end to the plans of the evil Dr Faust. Heinrich is the heavy hitter, wielding a scythe, and Gretchen is nominally the magic-user. Since you operate only Heinrich's movement, however, and spells appear to emanate from Heinrich at the player's behest, Gretchen doesn't really bring much to the table except a means of failure largely outside your control. You'd think, what with Heinrich's immortality, that Gretchen might exert a bit of discretion in combat, but instead she loves nothing more than to get right into the fray and put your progress in jeopardy by standing gormlessly in front of heavily signposted attacks.

Heinrich never dies, but he can be incapacitated – sometimes torn to pieces – whereupon you must hammer A for a period several times longer than your attention span. Meanwhile, Gretchen has usually been pummelled to death, and a restart at one of the seemingly randomly placed checkpoints is imminent. Should you manage to keep Gretchen from killing herself, though, you can pick her up – imbuing her with Heinrich's life-replenishing powers. Much of the game, then, inevitably involves scurrying back and forth across the battlefield, holding Gretchen in your arms while trying to dodge attacks for long enough to get her health bar back up. You can call her to you with the right shoulder button, but she doesn't always seem particularly interested in obeying.

This profound annoyance is compounded by the game's more basic flaws: vision-obscuring screen-effects, lurching difficulty levels, hugely imprecise collision detection that sees you blown over by an attack that missed you by several metres, and a thirdperson camera that's not fit for purpose in many of the game's environments. In some cases, you're unable to turn Heinrich to look in a direction because the camera is caught on a building behind him. Other times, during the many boss battles, the viewpoint is locked in one direction, making it difficult for you to spot hazards, judge distances or locate suicidally idiotic companions.

There are adequate combat mechanics beneath the heavy guff of failure, such as a decent repertoire of combos, colourful magic attacks, items and an upgrade system. But these are genre staples in a game that's otherwise charmless, egregiously frustrating and essentially misconceived. Given the state of *Knights Contract*, the famously hellish result of Dr Faust's own little deal seems comparatively sweet. **[3]**

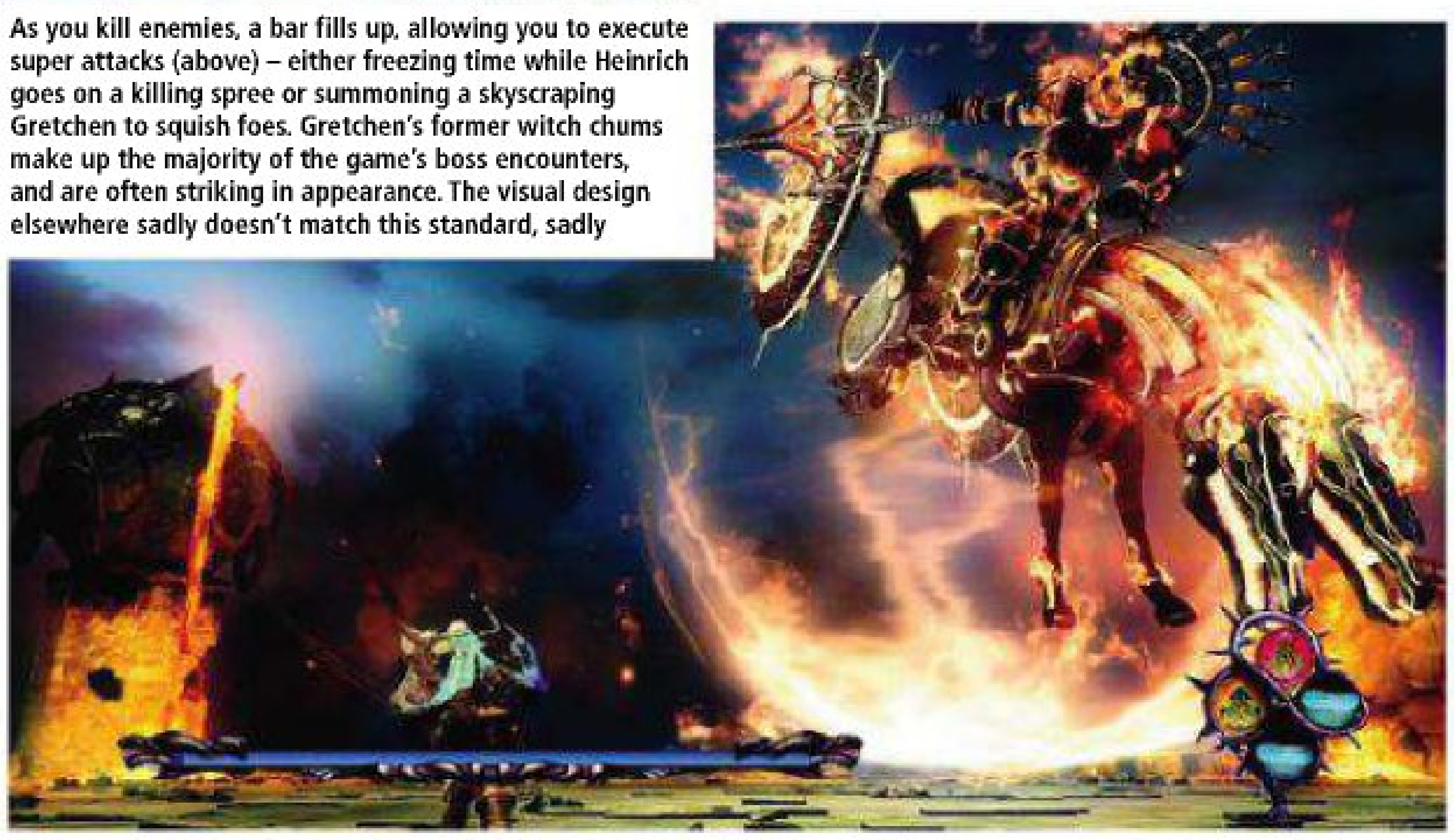


Grammarians weep for *Knights Contract* and its missing apostrophe. Just what illness do these poor knights contract? Or have they shrunk in size like a desiccating plum?





As you kill enemies, a bar fills up, allowing you to execute super attacks (above) – either freezing time while Heinrich goes on a killing spree or summoning a skyscraping Gretchen to squish foes. Gretchen's former witch chums make up the majority of the game's boss encounters, and are often striking in appearance. The visual design elsewhere sadly doesn't match this standard, sadly



Rear end



The line between camp and crap can be thin. *Bayonetta* digs in her stilettos firmly on the side of funny, but would we have found her so raucously, endearingly silly if the game had been a dud to play? What's certain is that *Knights Contract* largely plumps for po-faced, with its oft-interrupting cutscenes and lengthy dialoguing rarely suggesting that its tongue is in its cheek. Some of the magical attacks, however, vault the line entirely: witness a giant, blue and inexplicably naked Gretchen appearing and sitting down abruptly to crush combatants beneath her backside.

Save up to 30%

on an overseas subscription to **Edge**

- Get **Edge** delivered to your door before it hits the shops
- Never miss an issue
- Save up to 30% compared to buying **Edge** at the newsstand



North America
Subscribe for only $80
www.imsnews.com/edge-a142

Europe
Subscribe for only £64.99
www.myfavouritemagazines.co.uk/edgeeu

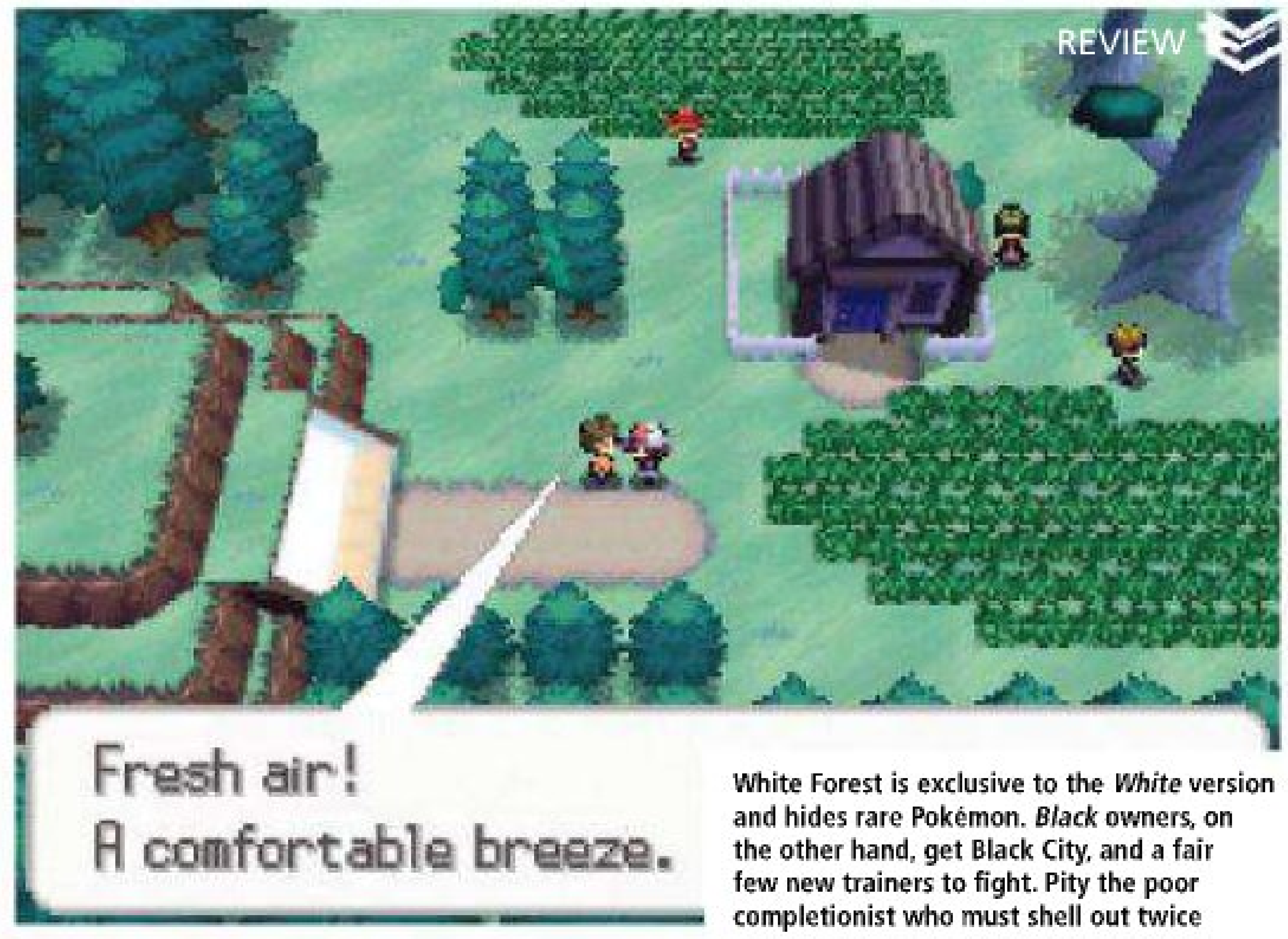
Rest of world
Subscribe for only £74.99
www.myfavouritemagazines.co.uk/edgerow

Terms and conditions: You will receive 13 issues per year. Your subscription will begin with the next available issue. Minimum subscription is 12 months. If at any time during the first 60 days you are dissatisfied please notify us in writing and we will refund you for all unmailed issues.



POKÉMON BLACK/WHITE

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), MARCH 4 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: GAME FREAK

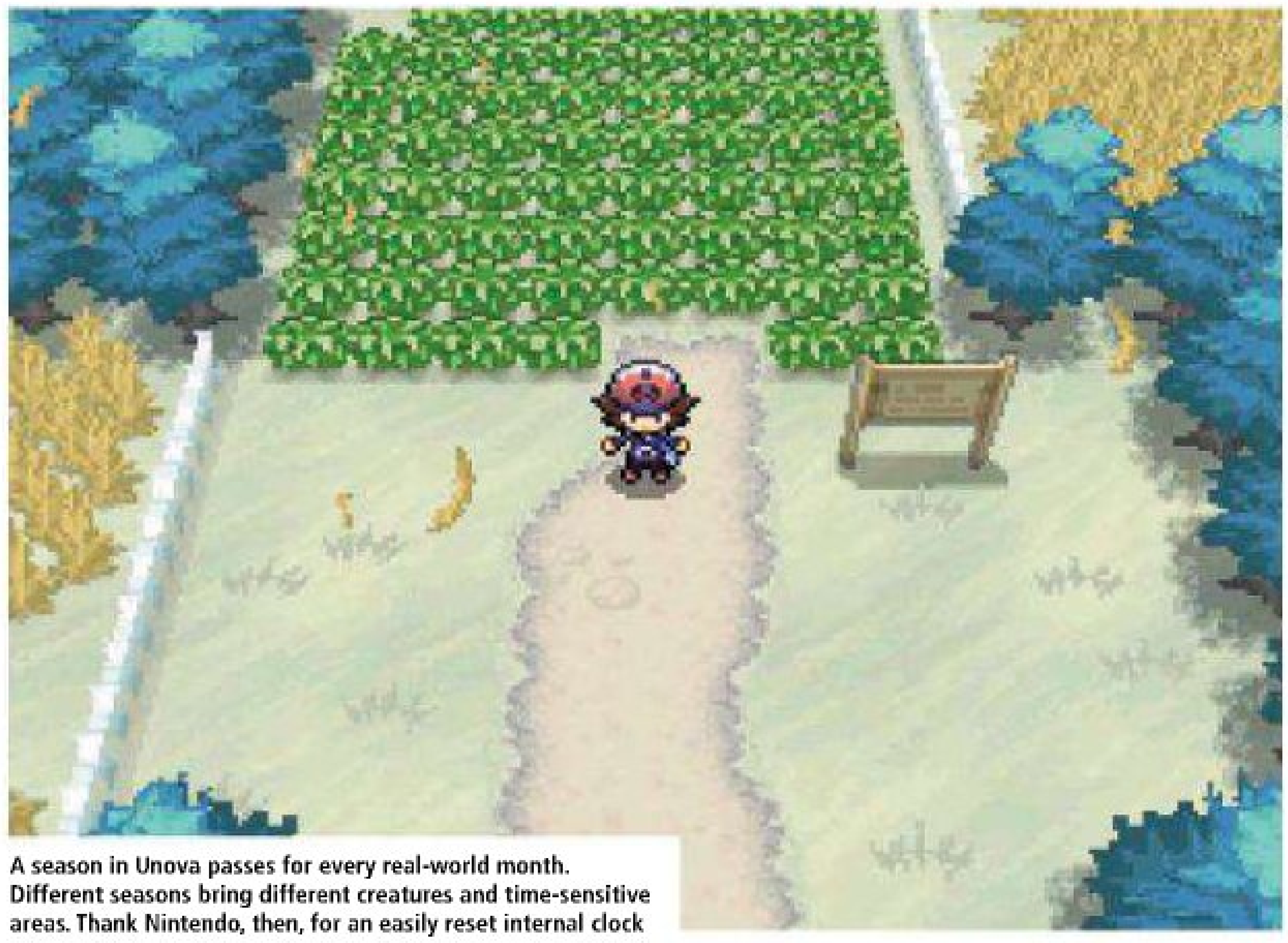


White Forest is exclusive to the *White* version and hides rare Pokémon. *Black* owners, on the other hand, get Black City, and a fair few new trainers to fight. Pity the poor completionist who must shell out twice

Black/White's Unova setting swaps the rural Japanese inspirations of regions old for the big city lights of New York. But this is no holiday. With 156 new monsters, and no old designs appearing until the story is complete, *Black/White* has the air of a witness protection scheme, rescuing Pokémon's core mechanic from the chaos of four overly iterative generations. Balancing 156 creatures, as opposed to the National Pokédex's 649, lets Game Freak rediscover the game that charmed us to begin with. Elemental types are carefully doled out, engineering trickier, strategically satisfying battles. New creatures have an air of mystery: what will it do, and how do we stop it? And, most important of all, Unova's caves are Zubat-free.

The most radical change alters how experience is dealt out. Level difference now dictates the post-fight reward. Breeze by with a higher level for a small prize or struggle with an underdog for a big payout. Not only does this prevent players from levelling their squad of six until they've stormed ahead of the difficulty curve, it reinvigorates the lower-level game with some much-needed impetus to return to early locations. *Pokémon*'s challenge was so easily undermined in the past that we forget the depth of its RPG ideas – allotting stat-buffing items, for example, or agonising over each monster's quartet of moves. After three generations of collecting 'em all, it's good to be reminded what 'em all are for.

Other additions focus on streamlining or ironing out stubborn kinks. Pokémon Centers and Marts are combined into one handy location. Technical machines welcome experimentation with infinite uses. Each area contains a healer character, to prevent treks to the Center (and the tedious healing animation therein). Yes, in the context of the hundred-hour endgame, these changes are trifling, but they make for the slickest, most agreeable story campaign yet. It also helps that Game Freak packs the game with narrative events; none well written (odd, since much of the incidental dialogue is very witty), but giving the adventure a sense of objective beyond the traditional gym badge pilgrimage.



A season in Unova passes for every real-world month. Different seasons bring different creatures and time-sensitive areas. Thank Nintendo, then, for an easily reset internal clock

The cutting-edge vibe of *Black/White*'s take on Manhattan rubs off on its multiplayer functionality. In-cart IR allows trainers to trade and battle on the spot without first travelling to a Pokémon Center. After fixing this long-term bugbear, Game Freak goes on to ply trainers with goofy multiplayer distractions, from DSi camera-enabled video chat to Entralink, a co-op mode that dumps one trainer in another's Unova with three minutes to complete a delivery mission.

Bar the PC-hosted Dream World (see 'Dream weaver'), nothing here matches the substantial offer of *Dragon Quest IX*'s co-op, but it all taps into the idea of brief encounters so key to the in-game action.

Beyond the wireless novelties and exemplary story campaign, *Black/White* is not the evolution it initially seems. Unova is dense but small, good for a busy 30-hour plot, not so much the bulky post-game collecting. Completing the tale grants access to new areas where old Pokémon can be caught. Huge value, yes, but the space feels crudely unplanned, a dumping ground that negates the delicately structured early hours. And triple battles, *Black/White*'s single combat upgrade (bar its energetic battle camera), are messy affairs. The clarity of one-on-one brings out the best in *Pokémon*'s elemental one-upmanship; when two other creatures enter the fray it becomes a manic free-for-all, shutting out all but the most dedicated competitive players.

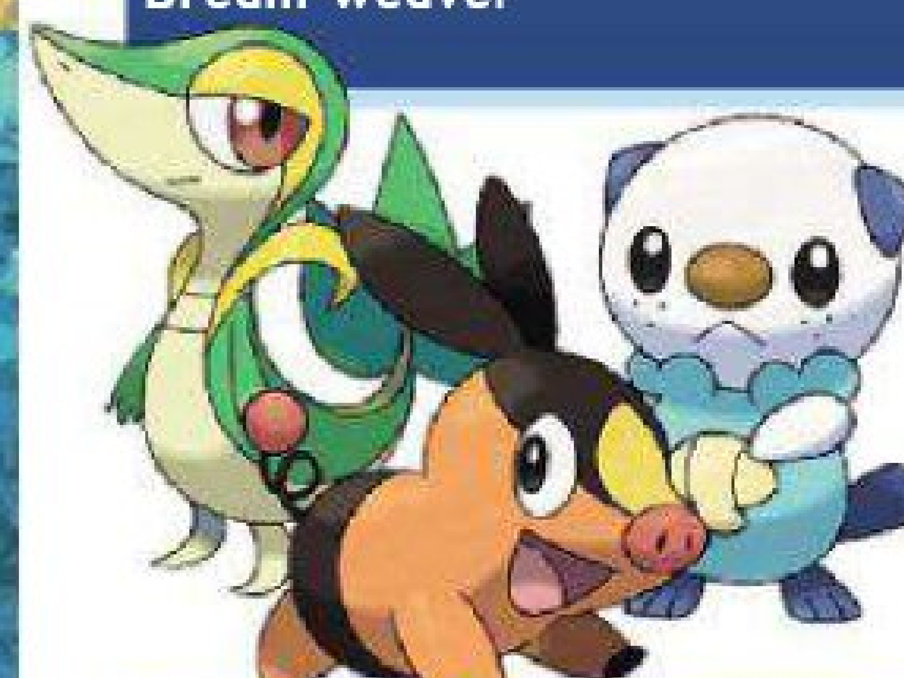
Where next for *Pokémon*? *Black* and *White* don't suggest any answers, but they do remind us why we'd care in the first place.

[8]



New designs are hit and miss, stretching from zebras (above) to coffins and ice creams. The latter evolves from a single scoop to a double with all the trimmings

Dream weaver



Wi-Fi access lets trainers synch their save file with a website, Pokémon Global Link. From here, stats and leaderboards can be observed. More importantly, it grants access to the Dream World, a site at which one in-game Pokémon can be uploaded into an idyllic dream cottage. Berries grown in the garden can be sent back to the game (they can't be grown in-game), and the Pokémon can enter Dream Island to befriend others in a series of simple minigames. These friends are later transferred to the game itself. Not only does Dream World introduce otherwise unattainable monsters, but they come with abilities they weren't previously able to learn, allowing Game Freak to adjust past designs for the modern competitive scene.



Traditionally static battle scenes are injected with a bit of life thanks to amusing Pokémon animations. On the downside, the perpetually zooming camera often distorts the fine sprites



BIONIC COMMANDO REARMED 2

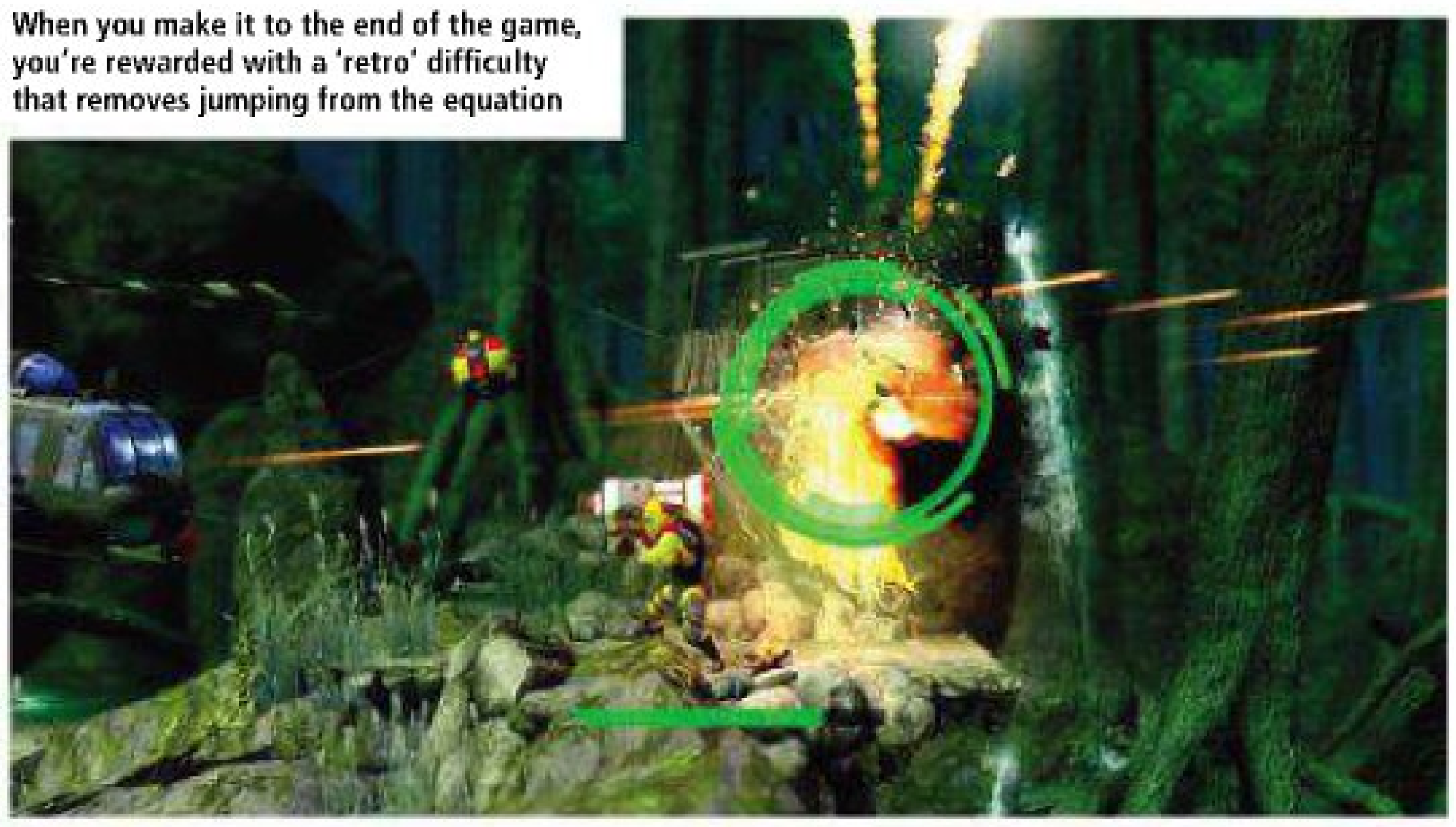
FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM **DEVELOPER:** FAT SHARK

Bionic Commando Rearmed, a remake of the 1988 NES game, had solid level design foundations to build on. The sequel, brimming with all-original levels, at least has strong aesthetic foundations to work with. *Rearmed* oozed retro nostalgia from its minimalist stylings, and while the sequel borrows many assets and quirks, the team has tried to up the ante with more distractions and the introduction of tweaks like jumping and ledge-grabbing. It may seem like a slight addition, but in practice jumping damages the delicate balance of mechanics that makes the series so distinctive and pushes *Rearmed 2* into the wider genre bracket of run-and-gun platforming.

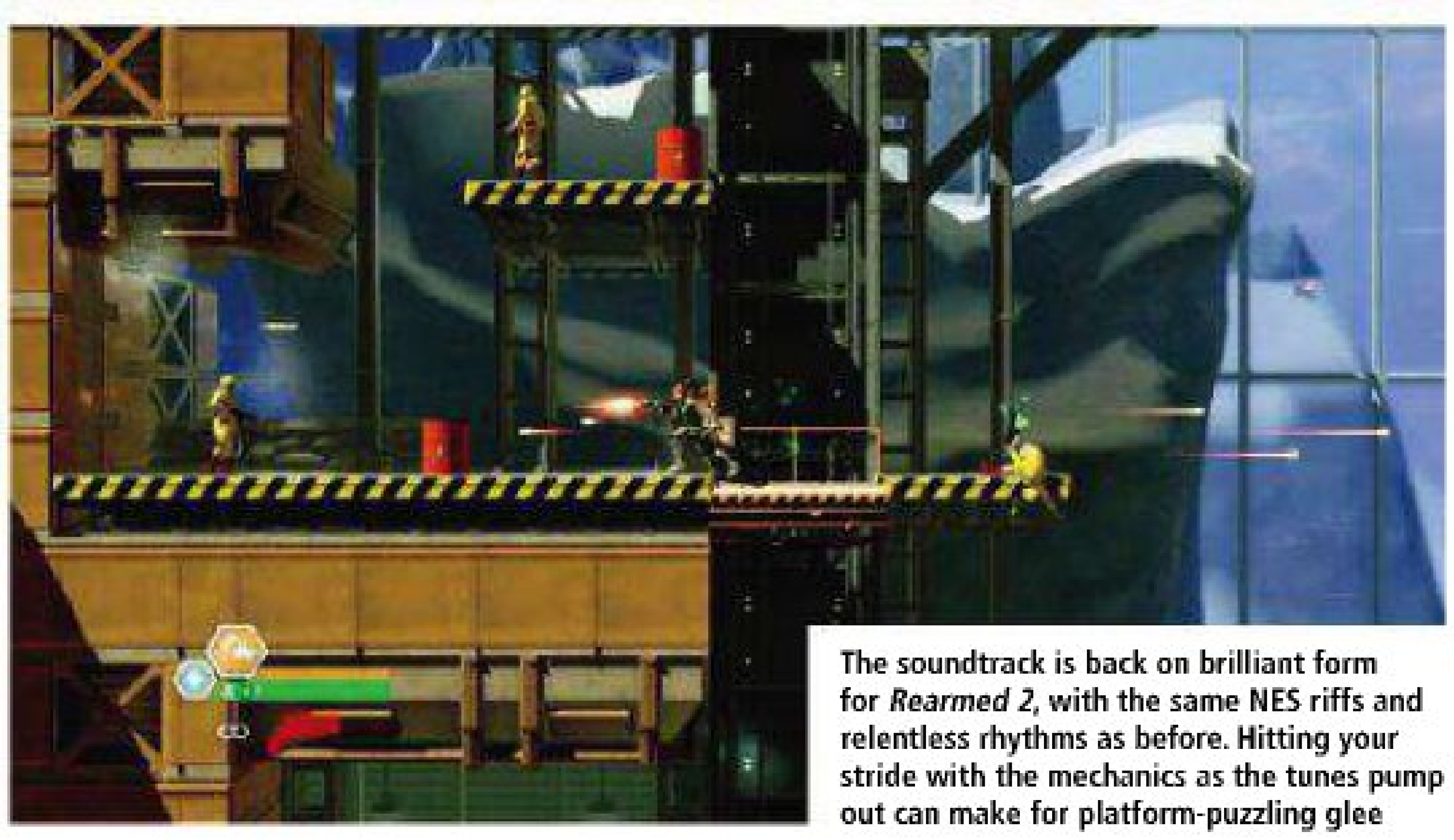
The trouble is that the new level layouts don't gel with the more gung-ho ethos. Unlike Epic's *Shadow Complex*, in which enemy encounters were often framed by long corridors, the action of *Rearmed 2* regularly takes place on miniature floating platforms, too small for a tossed grenade, the AI too basic to do anything but stare, shoot and every so often take cover. It's a discordant combination typified by awkward, mundane turret sections that momentarily transform the game into a *Silent Scope*-style shooter.

The final third, fortunately, saves the day. Forcing you to switch between caution and well-timed blasting, the level design finally steps up, adding in neat variables like rising water and building to a thrilling climax aboard an ascending rocket ship. It reminds you that there's life left in the franchise yet and shows Fat Shark capable of striking the fine balance of strategy and action we've come to expect.

More of the same might have brought accusations of laziness, but *Rearmed* showed that it takes a delicate hand to reinvent yourself with a firm knowledge of where you came from. This time the newly moustached Nathan 'Rad' Spencer gives it away: he's trying to get with the times, and it doesn't quite suit him. **[5]**



When you make it to the end of the game, you're rewarded with a 'retro' difficulty that removes jumping from the equation

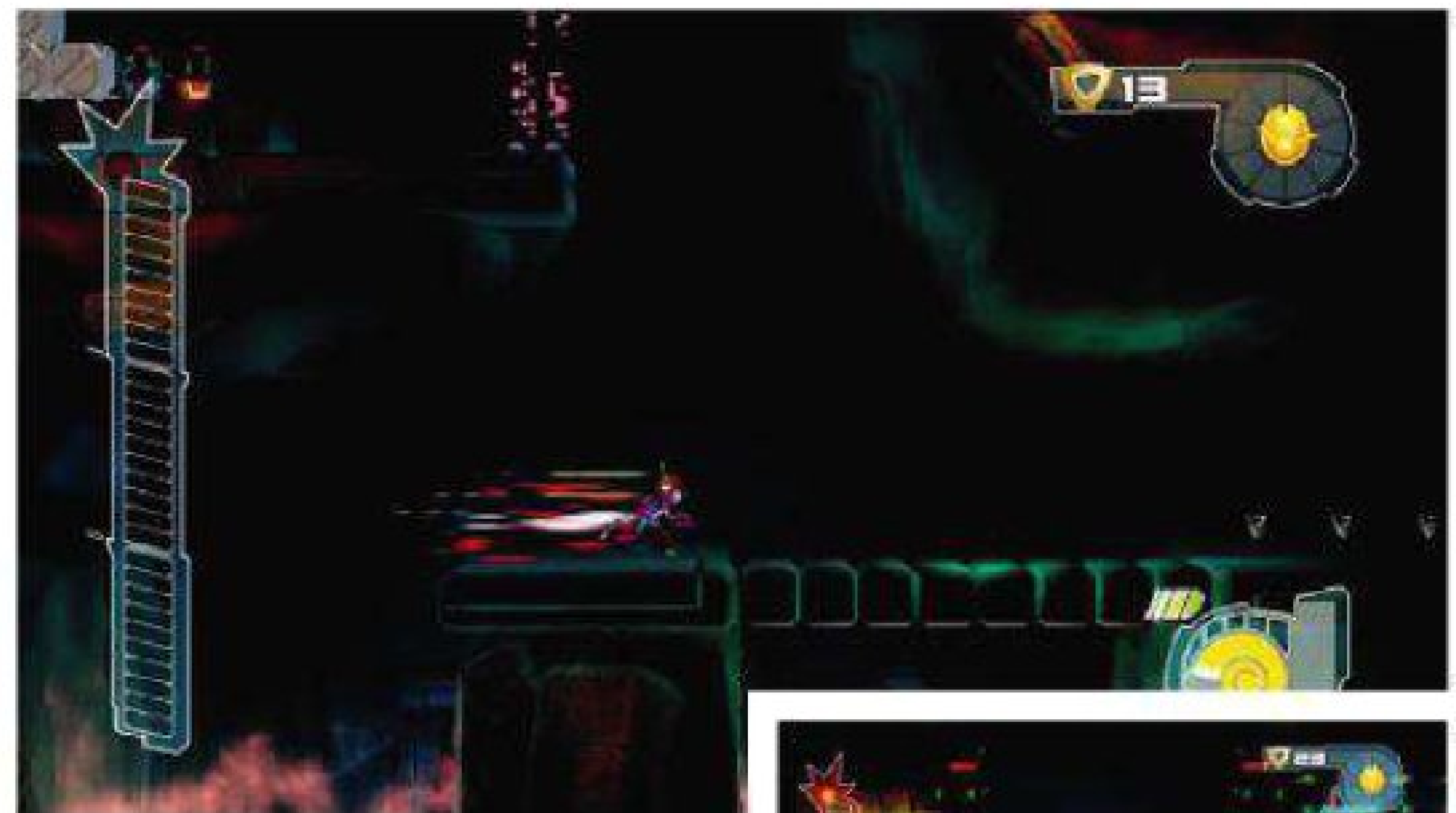


The soundtrack is back on brilliant form for *Rearmed 2*, with the same NES riffs and relentless rhythms as before. Hitting your stride with the mechanics as the tunes pump out can make for platform-puzzling glee



EXPLODEMON

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CURVE STUDIOS **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE







With more than one enemy, Explodemon's mechanics become less innovative and more infuriating. Bouncing around the screen trying to explode – and locate – foes becomes tiresome

Taking its cues from *Mega Man*, *Astro Boy* and *Metroid*, *Explodemon* pays homage to Japanese sidescrolling action, but it lacks the charisma and sticking power of the source material.

The aim is to suck up each level's collectibles while using the explosions that emanate from Explodemon's innards to blast your way through the puzzles and enemies that block your path. The mechanics make combat a confusing button-bash as your explosive hits obscure the action. Worse still is trying to manoeuvre boxes in order to activate switches with your self-detonations.

An unlock ladder provides high-score incentives, but some of the level design is a little too cramped and cavernous to invite you back, throwing up awkward ledge placements that break your momentum and send you hurtling to certain death. When levels do open up, throwing in launchpads that bounce you around like a pinball, there's a sense of free-spirited, early *Sonic*-era fun that is absent from the rest of the title.

There's a story bolted on that wouldn't be worth mentioning if it wasn't so foregrounded. Winks and nods to gaming lore are initially quirky, but for Explodemon to mostly deliver his lines in comedy Engrish is overkill. Compared with Twisted Pixel's work with the similarly styled gameplay component of 2009's *'Splosion Man*, Explodemon himself comes across as a lifeless, unremarkable protagonist without an ounce of 'Splosion Man's vivacity and tenacious commitment to thrills. In the crowded waters of download games, Curve will also find stiff competition from titles like this month's retro-revivalist *Hard Corps: Uprising* (see p103) and even many of the classics its game sends up.

Explodemon isn't a disaster, but it's certainly not a success – a shame because there are plenty of ideas here and a solid engine in place with which to execute them. The irony is that in mining some unforgettable games, Curve has delivered a forgettable hodgepodge. **[4]**

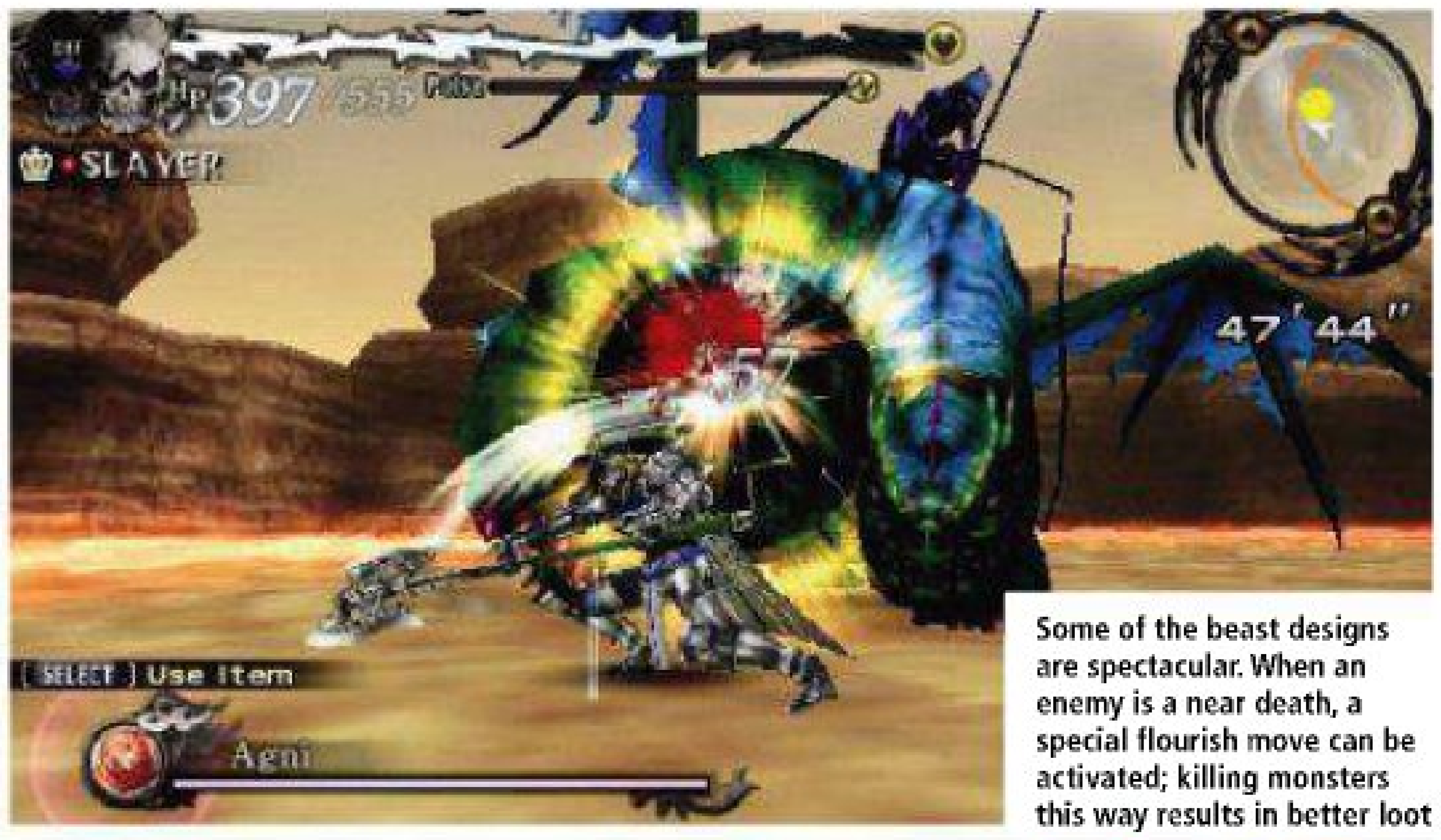


Explodemon's sprint devastates foes and doors that stand in his way. Other abilities, like double jumping, are handed out at a suitable pace

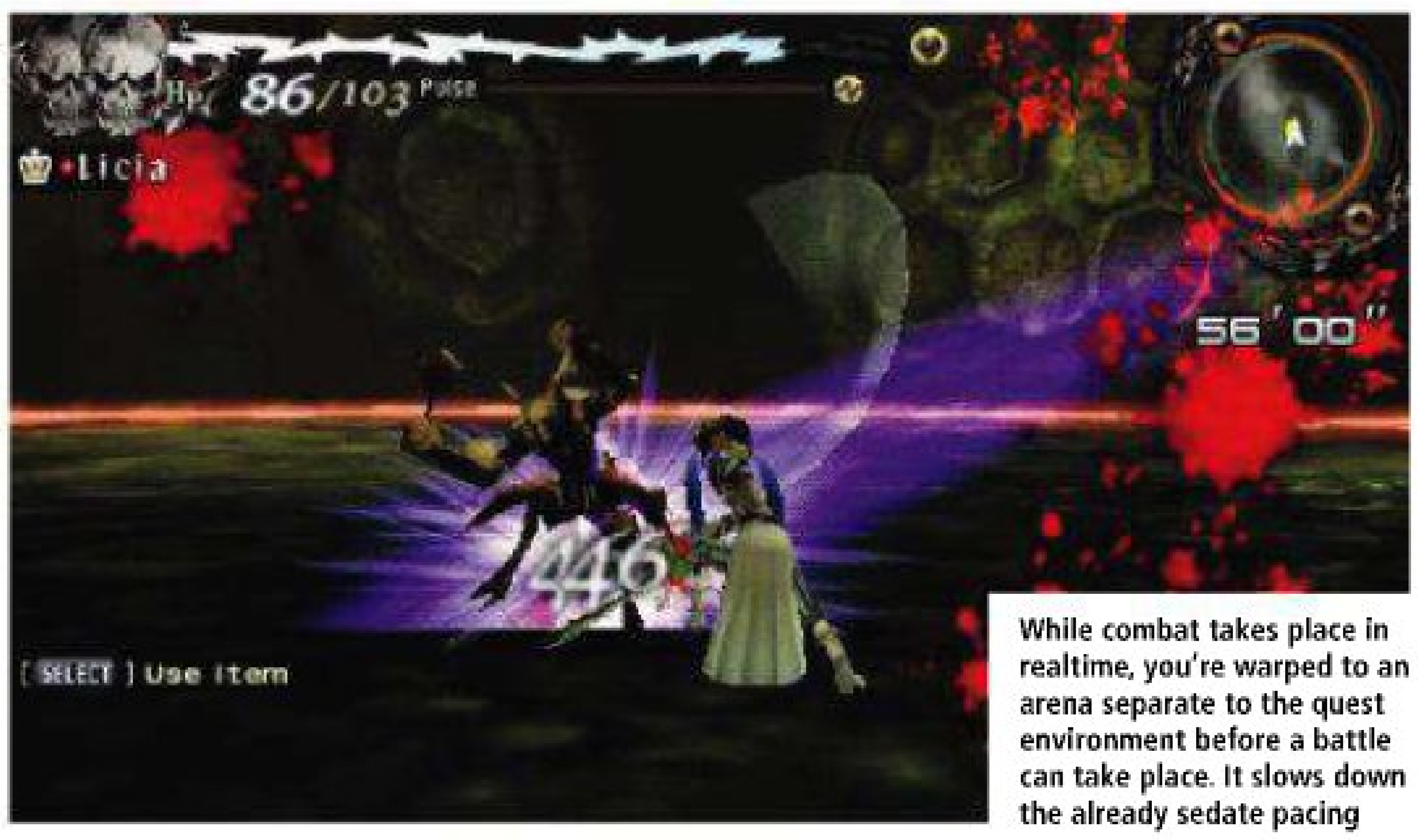


LORD OF ARCANA

FORMAT: PSP **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX **DEVELOPER:** ACCESS GAMES



Some of the beast designs are spectacular. When an enemy is a near death, a special flourish move can be activated; killing monsters this way results in better loot



While combat takes place in realtime, you're warped to an arena separate to the quest environment before a battle can take place. It slows down the already sedate pacing

Like many games, *Lord Of Arcana*'s opening level gives you a taste of what's to come, letting you play as a fully equipped and overpowered demon slayer before snatching away your abilities, stripping you to your underwear, and dumping you in the gameworld proper without a even a pauldron to your name. It's a mistake. When a game like *Metroid* pulls this trick, it makes you aware of your vulnerability; when a game like *Arcana* does it, it serves only to highlight, and make you resent, the coming grind.

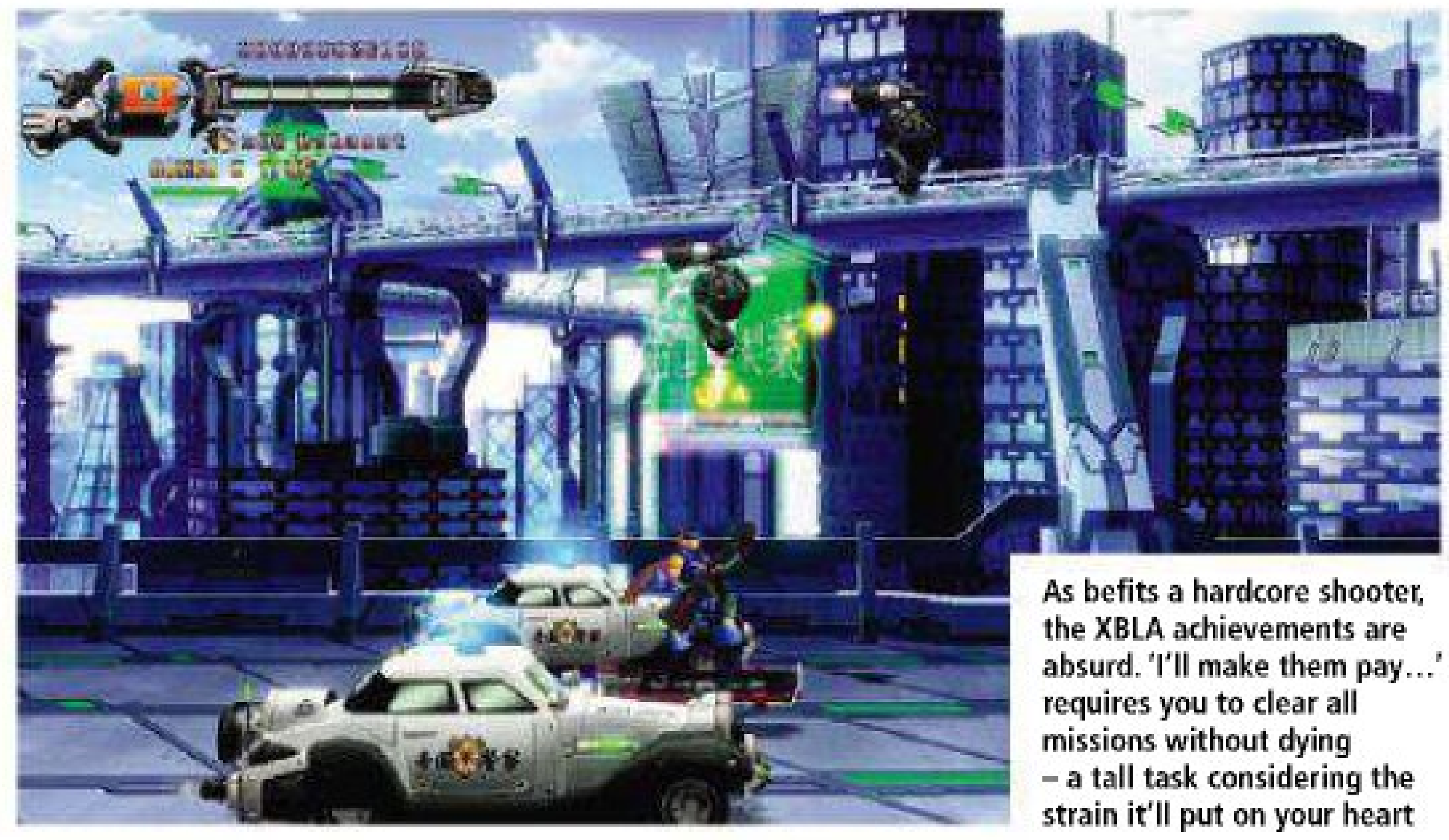
Access Games' take on the *Monster Hunter* formula attempts little beyond a straightforward recreation of that series' structure. Your amnesiac hero might be on a quest to save the land of Horodyn from a nebulously defined threat, but he or she goes about it by taking on a series of fetch quests for the local Slayers' Guild, slowly accruing the wealth and experience necessary to tool and level up. Like *Monster Hunter*, the game is built with co-op in mind (though with no online play included, pulling a party together will require some considerable organisation). This fact is keenly felt when going solo, which leaves the stale nature of the combat exposed. Battles – against both bosses and regular monsters – are a simple matter of ducking in and out of claw and talon range as your foe cycles through attack animations and you slowly chip away at their health bar.

More personality elsewhere could have redeemed it, but – aside from a few cameos from Square Enix's extensive bestiary – *Arcana* is lacking in this respect too, with dull visuals complemented by featureless environments. There's nothing wrong with competition, of course – *Monster Hunter*'s dominance in its particular niche has long gone unchallenged – but Access' game fails to move beyond a being limited imitation. **[4]**



HARD CORPS: UPRISING

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: KONAMI **DEVELOPER:** ARC SYSTEM WORKS



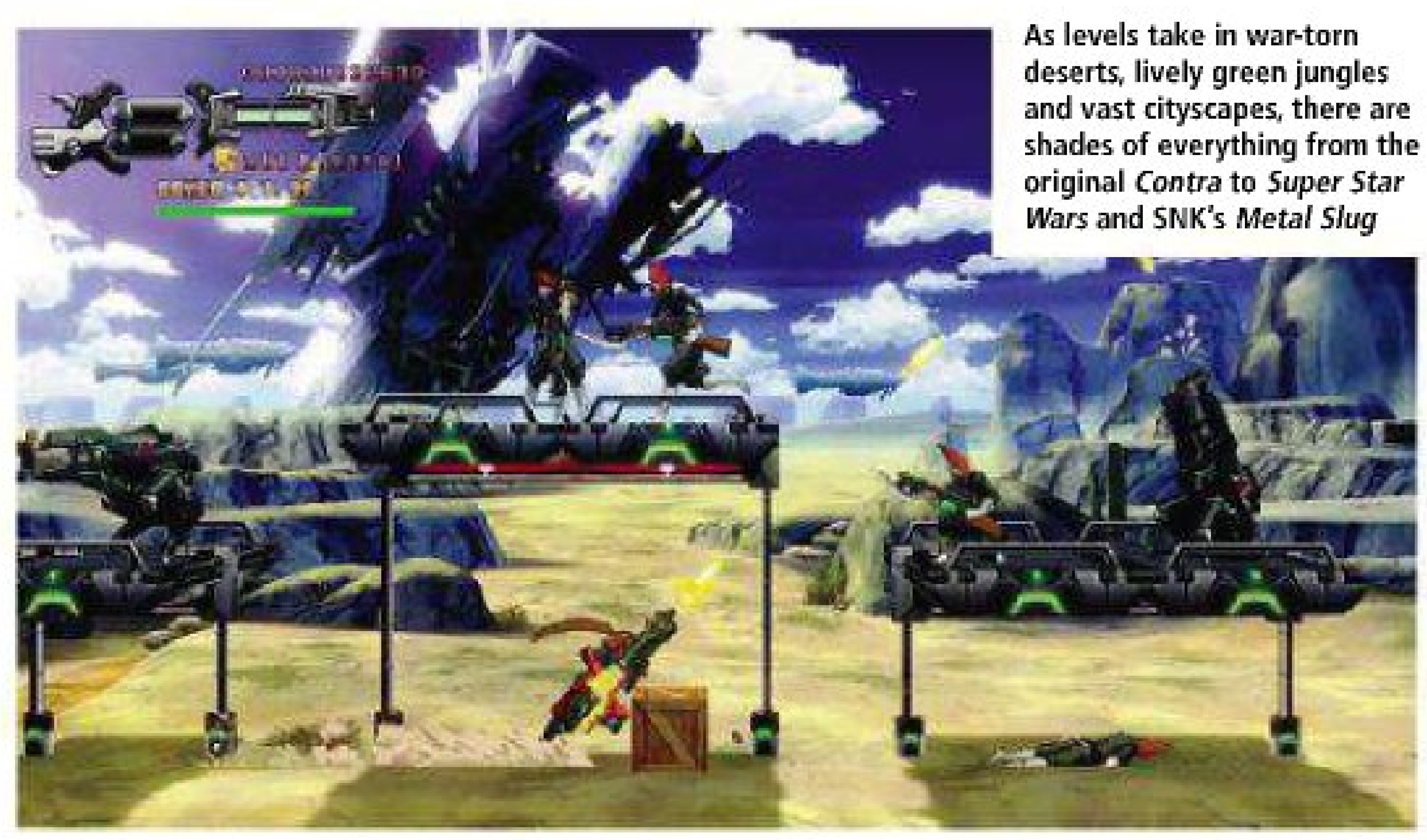
As befits a hardcore shooter, the XBLA achievements are absurd. 'I'll make them pay…' requires you to clear all missions without dying – a tall task considering the strain it'll put on your heart

The *Contra* name may have been excised but the soul remains. In the hands of *Guilty Gear* studio Arc System Works, this sequel to 1994's *Contra: Hard Corps* ticks all the franchise boxes but is transformed by the personality and vibrancy of Arc's visual design into a thing of exquisite side-scrolling beauty.

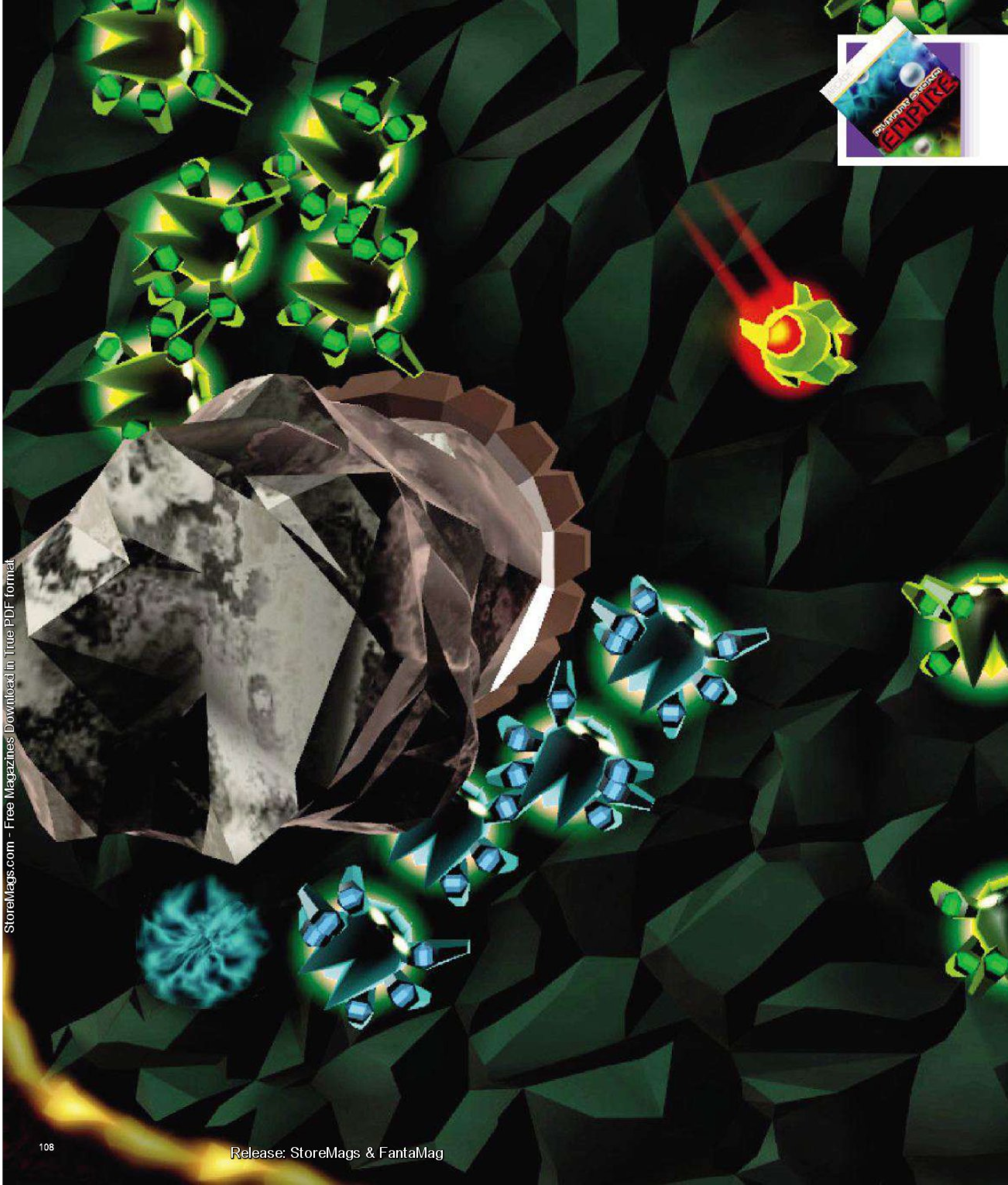
A run-and-gun ballet of projectile attacks and memory-test boss battles, *Uprising* is a double-whammy of aesthetic prowess and simple, solid genre mechanics. Stages play out like assault courses as you traverse your way to the end, leaping, dashing and firing in six directions like a sprite possessed. It almost feels a shame to mow down the waves of delicately drawn enemies, their accoutrements swaying as they collapse into wonderfully choreographed death. The use of 3D models for backdrops and specific in-game assets may not always gel with the lush hand-drawn animations, but it does create a useful separation between fore and background detail which helps keep your eyes trained on the action.

As tradition dictates, the difficulty is beyond reason in Arcade mode, though Rising mode offers an entry point for the casual audience. Points accumulated in-game are redeemed to customise your character, increasing health bars, adding lives and unlocking special abilities like greater firepower. It's a sizeable, sensible concession to the broader audience of console-based users – a trick many in the market continue to miss.

Uprising may not break any new ground in a genre that is arguably an endangered species, but it does a good job of breathing life into the dying breed. It's a reminder that an artist's eye, when met by a designer's understanding of modern tastes, can revitalise a struggling brand and make the old feel new again. **[7]**



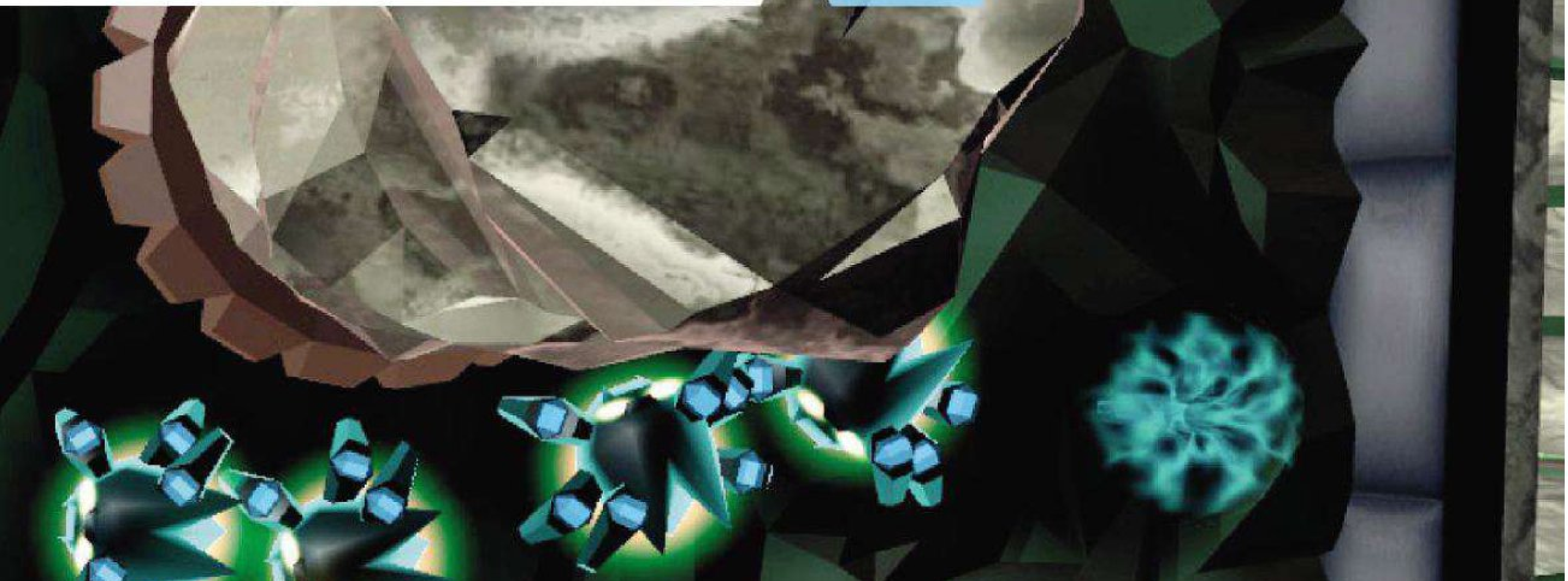
As levels take in war-torn deserts, lively green jungles and vast cityscapes, there are shades of everything from the original *Contra* to *Super Star Wars* and SNK's *Metal Slug*


EMPIRE

TIME EXTEND

MUTANT STORM EMPIRE

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **POMPOM GAMES**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2007**



Load up the squid guns and slip into the warm amniotic fluid – PomPom Games' most ambitious title wants to take you on a typically bizarre safari

If pretty good developers can often do a bit of everything, brilliant developers – particularly brilliant indie developers – tend to do one single thing extremely well. As studios go, PomPom Games is a case in point. Happy to tinker endlessly with the sparking genome that made Eugene Jarvis' early coin-op output so fresh, the two-man team has always specialised in pared-down blasting mechanics wedded to a cheerily gynaecological art style. Squeamish, gloopy and otherworldly, PomPom's offerings come across as flying visits for the most part: an energetic buzz over the landscape followed by the briefest of touchdowns to encounter – and generally obliterate – some of the volatile native wildlife, before it's time to zip right back out again, head spinning, ears ringing and stomach churning.

Mutant Storm Empire was always going to be different. Following *Mutant Storm Reloaded*'s successful ported debut in the early days of the Xbox Live Arcade service, *Empire* was planned as something much bolder than another colourful reworking of *Robotron: 2084* or *Defender*. It was to be a small game made large. It was to be an arcade epic built from brisk strokes, huge environments and dozens of bosses – each one stranger, dribblier and more inventive than the last. If PomPom's previous titles had been day trips to single, fascinating Galápagos islands, then, this was conceived as a breathless rush across the entire archipelago. There was only one question: how would a team that specialised in tiny, detailed experiences find a way to put its stamp on such a giant undertaking?

Not through mechanical invention, certainly. Twin-stick shooters tend to be the most fiercely specific of genres, and PomPom's peculiar skill has always been in refining the basic elements rather than offering any interesting variations on them. Like *Reloaded*, *Empire* would still be built around the simple business of strafing and shooting, offering clean, clear-headed controls in order to provide the perfect contrast to the slimy enemies spawning in ugly clusters or roaming about in grumpy, tussling herds. Smart bombs and bosses would mix things up occasionally, but – barring a new combo system that saw you chaining together kills of specific enemy types to keep your

Does a slack-jawed robot murderer with bunny ears count as a boss in PomPom's quirky world? Yes





BLACK BELT

If *Mutant Storm Reloaded* featured some of the most demanding Achievements available on Xbox Live Arcade, as players struggled to get to grips with the fine art of Blastikkidoo, *Empire* is not to be outdone with its own handful of almost unattainable rewards. While completing the game on the Black Belt setting probably remains the hardest for even arcade veterans to collect, Millionaire Twins will possibly be the most elusive, as it requires finding a multiplayer partner for a collaborative attack on the hordes.



score heading upwards in exponential bursts – there would be few technical intricacies to elevate the developer's latest from its impressive back catalogue – or, in fact, from the rest of the dual-thumbstick crowd.

PomPom didn't plan to throw in any new narrative tricks, either. As was fast becoming the studio's standard approach, *Empire*'s huge unspooling worlds and snarling, skittering, clanking beasts are explained away with a short, thrifty paragraph of jokey and bombastic non-specifics – a paragraph that trails off quickly in a typically self-deprecating manner. While there would be a supreme boss lurking at the end of the final level, your reasons for killing it would probably be limited to the fact that, like everything else you'd killed in order to get to it, it was too creatively disgusting to live. PomPom's sickly, regurgitated art direction has always provided the best kind of motivation for the endless carnage that tends to erupt in its games, anyway – deeper levels of justification are superfluous.

Instead, the developer smartly chose to zero in on its core skill: inventive, disturbing (and yet oddly endearing) visual design. Faced with a much broader canvas, the flimsy solo chambers of *Reloaded* begin to reach out and branch. Their walls turn from slippery neon gelatin to barriers of rock or steel, while iron floors studded with rivets and bolts warp slickly into focus underneath them. Single rooms become first clusters, then chains and finally genuine corridors: intricate spaces bristling with ancient engineering, snug battle arenas and sneaky monster closets. There are pistons and spinning gears lurking in the darkness now. There are unappetising water features.

Far more dazzling than the shift in architectural ambition, however, is the increased scope of the game's uniformly hideous cast. The original *Mutant Storm* may have given players the questionable delights of prolonged encounters with the shimmering Sperm Flower, whose taut, drum-like skin and wispy, trailing tails swim through so many sweaty arcade nightmares, or thrown them up against ranks of those punkish little Jelly Baby homunculi, covered in spikes that might be jewellery or simply pieces of their pink and green hides, but *Empire* chose to ramp things up considerably. Half an hour's introductory shooting would see you facing off against vast, toothless fish, riddled with electrified breeding sacs, against blind vacuum-cleaner-nosed lumps of invertebrate flesh with mud-spewing boils, and against legions of vampiric frogspawn, itching to swarm together into frantic bait balls and tear you to pieces. Best of all, with that flailing tendril and sheeny, bulbous surface, your own avatar was hardly less disgusting than most of the enemies you blasted apart.

Half an hour's introductory shooting would see you facing off against legions of vampiric frogspawn, itching to tear you to pieces

Taken as a whole, then, *Empire*'s nothing less than a dark and enjoyable horrifically mutated safari, a kind of midnight Pokémon game, where the fun isn't just in the killing, but often in the mere sighting of a new enemy. The expanded locations, shifting from the disco urethras and pulsating intestines of the original to include cog-speckled spaceship interiors and now-dusty, ancient sea beds, allow for a wider sweep of wildlife, too, as ghastly things riddled with turrets take their



Hallways in *Empire* are almost always an opportunity for PomPom to explore different shapes. Turrets must be taken out in sequence to feed the combo system





Screenshots struggle to convey the wonderful horror of a PomPom attack, as hundreds of slimy mutant tadpoles erupt from the ground and race towards you



Colour-coded cannonballs call for precision shooting, and the game's playful physics only add to the chaos

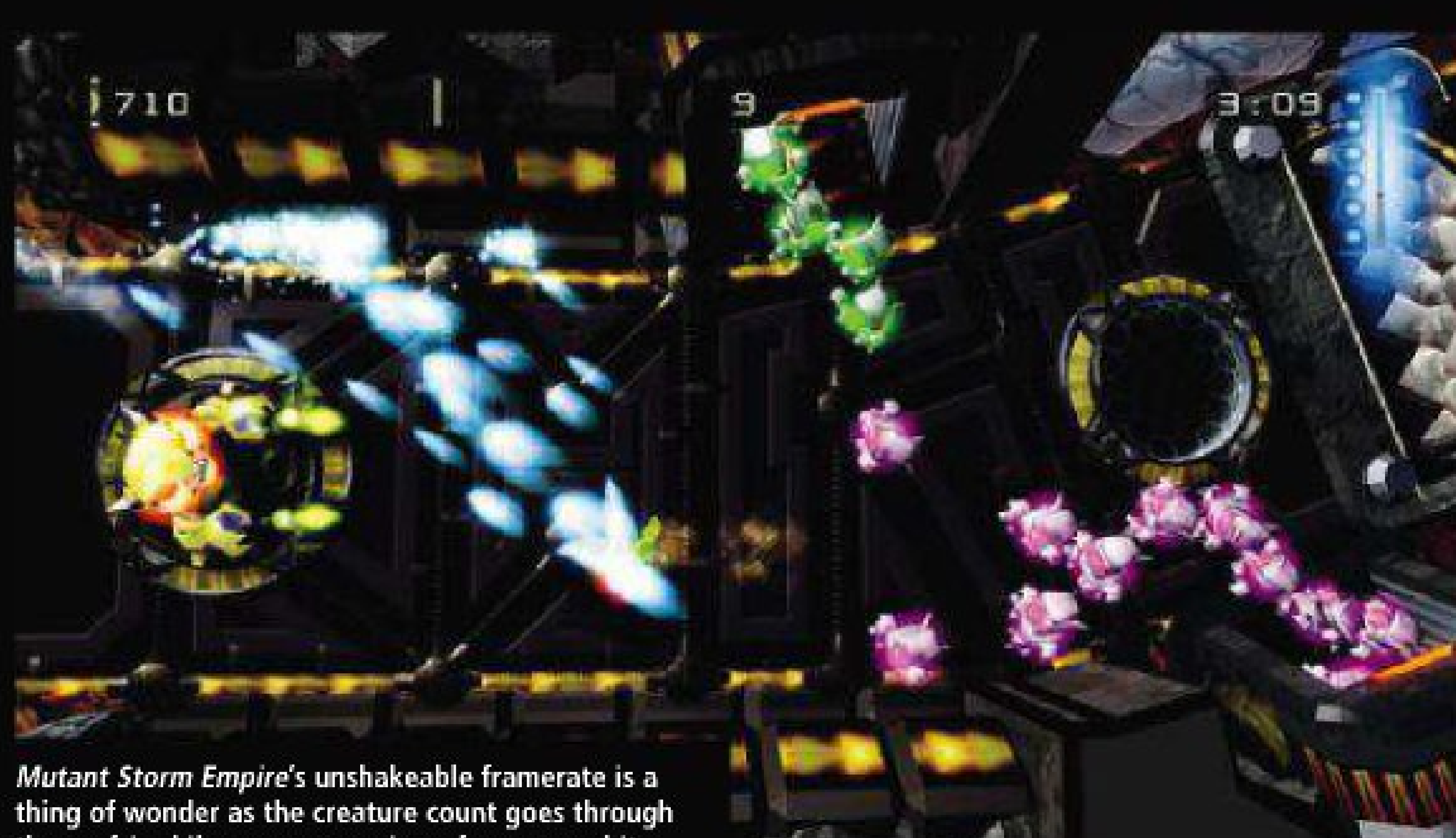


places in line alongside ghastly things riddled with gills, and robot centipedes with glowing Mickey Mouse ears crawl around between clamp-jawed metal monkeys and doll-faced mechanical cat-bots. And all the while, PomPom's singular flair isn't just that it can call up such monsters at will, as anyone with a Wacom tablet and a copy of Maya can create endless armies of grotesques after a week of tinkering. It's that – somehow – with the finer detailing, the studio manages to make these horrors slyly palatable at the same time.

The deeper you travel into *Empire*, the wavering line between environmental hazard and aborted biological horror becomes increasingly brittle. Corridors fill with murderous red bubbles, laser beams carve arenas into little pockets of death, and around each corner lurks a pelting from intestinal boulders, or oozing lakes of radioactive acid. Tying everything together, however, even when the game's grim invention threatens to pull it to pieces, is that simple combo system at the heart of it all: a basic, almost primitive, play mechanic that quickly becomes irresistible as you try to collect every dripping scalp the adventure has to offer you. PomPom isn't just nudging you towards high scores to wring greater strategic depths from its simple kill zones – although it turns out that they are there for the taking – it's prompting you to explore the entire breadth of *Mutant Storm*'s world with sharp eyes, and to kill the innumerable queasy wonders within.

Simple to play and yet grotesquely intricate to explore, PomPom's most elaborate game was also to be its greatest sales disappointment. Launched – on Halloween itself, as it happens – on an Xbox Live Arcade platform that was already moving in new directions, inching up the file size cap as it reached out towards grander, smirkier games, *Mutant Storm Empire* was crushed between franchise offshoots, slick vertical slices, puzzle ports and Doritos-powered ad tie-ins. Forever empty, the Downloadable Content tab on its start screen proves that menu options really can inspire pathos, and the game itself, in a morbidly appropriate fashion, survives as a hint at the direction in which Microsoft's platform chose not to evolve: a lone, discarded rock pool, still bubbling with useless, viable life.

PomPom Games, meanwhile, chose to swim outwards towards the smaller platforms, with the likes of ghoulish iPhone puzzlers such as *Poppi*, and *Alien Zombie Death*, a blisteringly violent PSP mini, bringing the duo's blend of dark, wayward biological fantasy and arcadey mechanics to whichever ecosystem would support it most naturally. *Empire*, however, derelict and mostly unplayed, remains both its strangest and most complete monument to date. It's a big game and a lavish one, fizzing still with dozens of fierce little ideas.

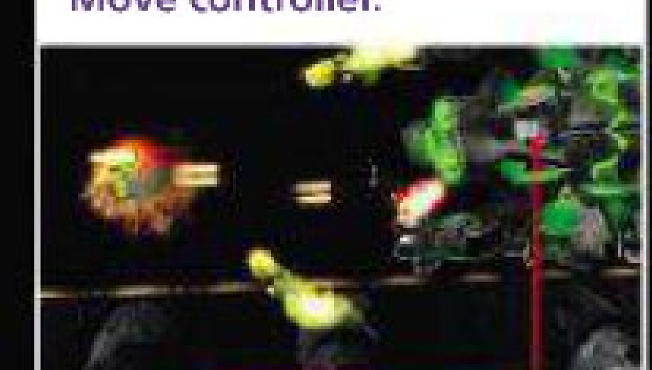


Mutant Storm Empire's unshakeable framerate is a thing of wonder as the creature count goes through the roof. Luckily, you can survive a few enemy hits



VIRAL STRAINS

With Xbox Live Arcade behind it, PomPom has made a decent run at a few other platforms, with a decent version of *Astro Tripper* making it on to PlayStation Network – even if it was subsequently overlooked by most of the audience – and *Poppi*, a smart little physics-based puzzler, hitting iPhone. The team's most enjoyable work since *Empire*, however, remains *Alien Zombie Death*, the side-scrolling platform shooter released last year as a PSP mini. A cross-section of PomPom's preoccupations, ranging from power-ups and horrible aliens to pencil-thin narratives, *AZD* remains the best place to begin exploring PSP's snackable catalogue. Looking to the future, meanwhile, PomPom is rumoured to be exploring the potential of Sony's Move controller.



THE MAKING OF... BERZERK

Trapped in a maze, chased by a terrifying emoticon: it's time to look at the method behind the madness.

FORMAT: **COIN-OP** PUBLISHER: **STERN ELECTRONICS** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **1980**

It's charming, yet brutal: a game that, back in the arcades, would lure players to its cabinet by broadcasting oddball one-liners, before stealing their money with unexpected ferocity. It's simplistic, yet quietly thoughtful, building a world from stick-men and right angles, but populating it with clever ideas such as quirky AI that allows the enemies to make mistakes. And, for all the games it's inspired, it feels like both forerunner and dead end: a rough sketch of a strange new genre, combined with that genre's ultimate expression. *Berzerk* is weird.

It isn't surprising, then, that the idea came to its designer in a dream. "I dreamt of a black-and-white videogame with a stick-figure man and lots of robots closing in on him," says **Alan McNeil**, *Berzerk*'s creator. "It was just a second's worth of action, but it was exactly what I made in pass one of the design. Back in those days, I had many epic dreams with much futuristic detail in them, but none were problem solving or prophetic like that. It stood out. The *Berzerk* dream was more like the déjà-vu flashes I've had since I was 11: just for a second, the future overlays the present. Everything: the sights, smells, sounds, touch, even thoughts. It's pretty confusing and not useful. All it tells me is I can look forward to living until that moment arrives."

The *Berzerk* dream came along at a fortuitous time. After a wayward education involving architecture, industrial design, and computer art, McNeil had decided to forge a career in games. Following a stint at Bally/Midway in which he was told he didn't have the experience to make his own arcade title ("This annoyed me," remembers the designer. "Every McNeil I've met is stubborn as a rock. None like being held back. I'm no exception"), he wound up at Stern Electronics, a troubled firm looking for a pinball programmer. "They had a licence from Bally/Midway to take Bally's pinball controller board for use in their own games. The problem was they didn't get source code.





They could change the playfield and art but the hardware was frozen. I asked if I could do a videogame if I fixed the pinball problem. They said 'yes'."

After creating a new OS for the pinball hardware and turning out a few titles, McNeil could finally put buzzers and ball-bearings behind him. That's when he had The Dream, and it didn't take long to turn that dream into a videogame prototype.

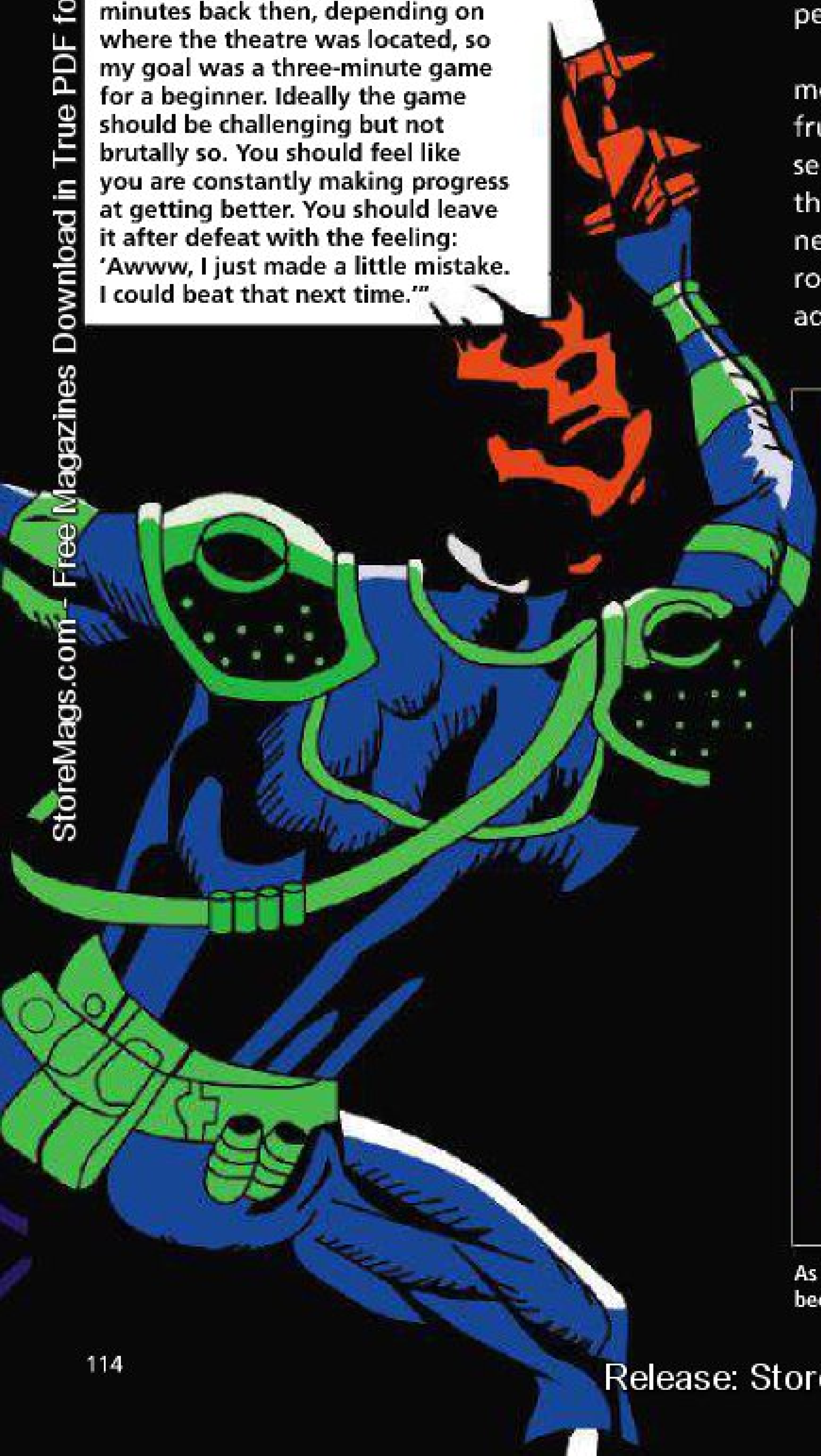
Berzerk is a fast-paced multi-directional shooter set inside a series of 64,000 mazes. The player's objective is to escape from one room to the next without being killed by a range of increasingly aggressive robots – ideally blasting the enemies as they go, earning a point multiplier for clearing each area. It's a simple concept and one that the designer was quick to get up and running. "Pass one of the game turned out to be exactly that dream moment. I was playing and said: 'Yay, this is fun'," says McNeil.

That doesn't mean it was perfect, however. "It got too



THE GAME OF LIVES

"I had a rule of thumb for gameplay that the coin operators – arcade owners – hated," remembers McNeil. "They were greedy guys, as so many no-talent people are. They always wanted options switches to set the number of lives to one. I refused to program that in. I believe that my rule of thumb helped make *Berzerk* a good value coin-op game. The rule was to take the current price of a movie theatre ticket and divide it down to pennies-per-minute, and then figure out the time you should get for a quarter. It was between three and five minutes back then, depending on where the theatre was located, so my goal was a three-minute game for a beginner. Ideally the game should be challenging but not brutally so. You should feel like you are constantly making progress at getting better. You should leave it after defeat with the feeling: 'Awww, I just made a little mistake. I could beat that next time.'"



hard as the robots increased," he remembers. "With six robots, I was having a frustrating, un-fun time. The game favoured the robots too much. They would run into each other occasionally, but the average game time, one life, was about six seconds. Not good. I wanted the average starting player to get lots more play before needing to put another quarter in."

His solution was typically original: fallible AI. "I wanted the robots to be relentless, but so single-minded that they were stupid," he says, so he crafted foes that would often shoot poorly, or kill themselves in collisions with each other and the environment. "It was different from other games where the enemies were perfect in their attacks and you had to dodge perfectly aimed shots."

McNeil also added a further means of levelling the odds. "My frustration at being killed so fast sent me on to pass two, known to the engineers as 'Robot Picnic'. I needed help beating those pesky robots. I needed a weapon. I added laser bolts, and that was better: I could kill a few robots, but they were still changing paths awfully fast and coming at you from too many directions, because there were no walls. Playtime for a life was up to ten seconds. I still wasn't happy with the game."

On to pass three. "How could I slow down the robots? I tried making them move slower, but then they looked clunky and lame," laughs McNeil. "I figured I'd need barriers between the robots and the human. So I started looking at maze generators, and devised a super-simple scheme. To make the maze non-random, I used the XY coordinate of the room as a 16bit number to seed my random number generator. That way you could exit, run back and see the same room. It makes the universe more real if you leave a room with a box in the middle and return to a room with box in the middle. Totally random rooms are not immersive: your brain goes 'huh?' and the fantasy collapses."

After electrifying the walls of the rooms to make them deadly for both players and robots, McNeil was on his way to an entertaining game, but plenty



As the screen fills with robots, the chances of a few of your assailants accidentally killing themselves becomes much higher. Slow-moving bullets make for combat that can feel a bit like naval warfare



of other titles would feature mazes and gunplay. A big part of *Berzerk*'s strange appeal was born with the inclusion of Evil Otto: a floating smiley face that pursues the player, and cannot be killed.

"The pass-three game had some problems," McNeil explains. "You could stand all day in a room once the robots were eliminated, so I needed something to get you to move along. This was in the era of the smiley face, that obnoxious yellow circle with the two black dots for eyes, the arc for a smile and the words 'Have a nice day!' below it. I really despised it. I associated it with salesman and corporations, neither of which really wanted you to have a nice day but both want to cover themselves in fake friendliness. I decided to show it like it was: 'Have a nice day while I beat you to death'. I made the smiley come straight for you while bouncing like a yellow ball. It added a dash of bitter sarcasm."

The game's final ingredient came from the emerging field of speech synthesis, another area that received a McNeil twist. While a handful of early arcade games spoke to players, *Berzerk* just wouldn't shut up. "A salesman visited us during the development of *Berzerk* with a 'speech chip' intended for helping blind people," McNeil remembers. "They were hoping to get it into toys or games. It sounded very robotic and was limited to around 24 fixed words. It was using custom hardware to make hisses and tones: all the computer could







The arrival of Evil Otto is rarely good news. *Berzerk*'s floating emoticon has no trouble slipping through walls, and can't be killed. Elements of the design can be seen in the invulnerable Hulks of *Robotron*, created to keep the player moving

control was the word and the pitch of the word. You could order these chips with any set of words, limited to the tiny chip size. The price was good in large quantities. The boss said: 'Could you use it?' I was sure I could right away.

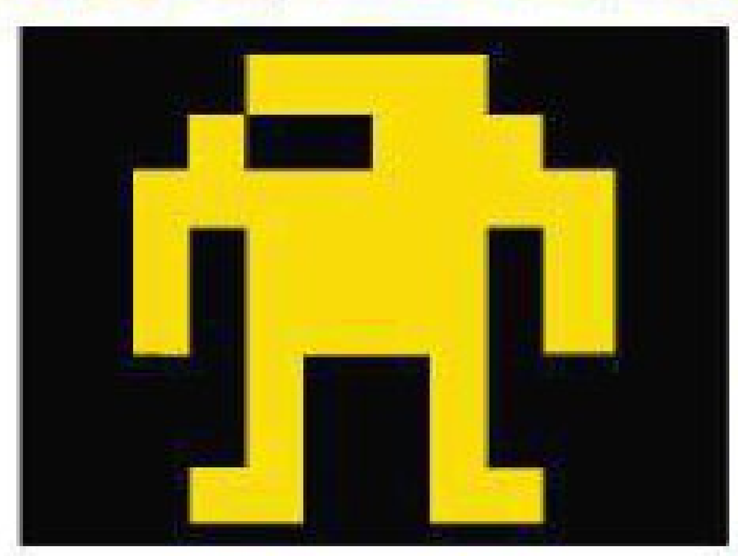
"I wanted the robots to sound like they were hunting you. I thought of ways the robots might describe the player: 'intruder' and 'human' came to mind. One of the engineers would run through the maze rooms without shooting any robots, so I decided to add in an extra player noun just for him: 'chicken'! Any time you left live robots in the previous room, the next room's robots would taunt you with 'Kill the chicken'. When I assembled the complete list of nouns and verbs, I had three words left and I had one sentence I really wanted on the chip so I dropped one verb and added: 'Coin detected in pocket'. One bar patron actually said: 'How did it know I still have some quarters?' and played until he didn't have quarters to find out."

"This was in the era of the smiley face, that obnoxious yellow circle with the two black dots for eyes. I really despised it"

Those four passes – plus an 11th-hour shift to colour graphics – were enough to make the game a hit with developers and punters alike. "I talked to Eugene Jarvis and Larry DeMar [the developers of the *Berzerk*-influenced *Robotron: 2084*] when I was considering working for Williams," says McNeil. "They are both great guys. I remember Eugene saying that *Berzerk* irritated them and they wanted to modify it to include some tougher situations. That was the itch they scratched for *Robotron*. I'm the same way. Something will irritate me and I'll want to improve it or redesign it."

After *Berzerk*, McNeil made a handful of other games, before heading off to get involved with animation programming. Today, he works mainly with the internet. While he's proud of his arcade endeavours, he admits he doesn't spend a great deal of time thinking about Evil Otto or all those mazes. In fact, he doesn't even have his own *Berzerk* cabinet. "That's a sore point," he winces. "I was given the first test cabinet – no outside artwork, just black. An arcade operator that I barely knew asked if he could put it on location and then split the take 50/50. At the end of that month he came over and gave me a bag with $300 in quarters. I never saw him again.

"I mentioned my missing game to one of the production guys. He said he had friends that could take care of the problem for a little favour in the future. They could leave him a hint, like a large salmon on his pillow." McNeil pauses. "I turned him down."



HAVE A NICE DIE

"The name, Evil Otto, was both a pun, Evil Auto – a push-you-onwards device – and a reference to a security manager, Mr Dave Otto, at a previous employer," laughs McNeil. "Mr Otto once decided that all engineers and programmers should take lunch from exactly noon until exactly 1pm atomic time. He instituted this with the announcement we all had to drop everything and head out the doors for lunch exactly on time. He then locked the doors. Naturally, this torqued us off, especially when we arrived back on a cold day to find we couldn't get back in. The very next day we all started having two-hour lunches. He also put speakers in all the rooms – including the bathrooms – and piped in beautiful music. Lots of Mantovani."



DIRECTORY

POWERED BY gamearea FRANKFURTRHEINMAIN — WWW.GAMEAREA-FRM.DE; FrankfurtRheinMain GmbH International Marketing of the Region — WWW.FRM-UNITED.COM; FRANKFURT — WWW.FRANKFURT-BUSINESS.NET

FRANKFURT'S COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAME SCENE AT A GLANCE

COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

3D-IO Games & Video Production GmbH
www.3d-io.com

4-Real Intermedia GmbH
www.4-real.de

Advanced Cyber Entertainment GmbH
www.ac-entertainment.com

bitComposer Games GmbH ▶135
www.bit-composer.com

BrainGame Publishing GmbH
www.braingame.de

Bronx Studios Entertainment GmbH
www.bronxstudios.com

Brot und Spiele GmbH
www.spieletipps.de

Cliffhanger Productions ▶138
www.cliffhanger-productions.com

CoreX3D GmbH ▶129
www.corex3d.com

Core X Games ▶129
www.likedynamite.com

Crytek GmbH ▶124
www.crytek.com

Deck13 Interactive GmbH ▶131
www.deck13.com

Dynamedion GbR
www.dynamedion.com

EA Phenomic
www.phenomic.de

eku interactive
www.eku-interactive.de

extra toxic gmbh & co. kg
www.extra-toxic.com

Falko Löffler
www.falkoloeffler.de

Frank Wagner
www.frank-wagner.org

GameReport.de
www.gamereport.de

Game-san Spiele GmbH
www.game-san.de

Gamesload
www.gamesload.de

keen games GmbH & Co.KG ▶133
www.keengames.com

keuthen.net IT & Network Solutions AG
www.keuthen.net

Keyfactor Entertainment GmbH
www.key-factor.de

Konami Digital Entertainment GmbH
www.konami.de

Krawall Gaming Network GmbH
www.krawall.de

Limbic Entertainment GmbH
www.limbic-entertainment.de

metricminds GmbH & Co. KG
www.metricminds.com

MMM MultiMediaManufaktur GmbH
www.multimediamanufaktur.com

NAMCO BANDAI Partners Germany GmbH
www.de.namcobandaigames.eu

netmin games
www.netmin.de

Nintendo of Europe GmbH
www.nintendo.de

playzo GmbH
www.playzo.de

Related Designs Software GmbH
www.related-designs.de

Sony Computer Entertainment Deutschland GmbH
www.de.scee.com

spielkind UG
www.spielkind-online.de

Torsten Fock
www.vulkanware.de

weltenbauer. 3D Vertriebs GmbH
www.weltenbauer.com

ZeniMax Europe Limited
www.zenimax.com

Zynga Game Germany GmbH
www.zynga.com

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

Brehm & v. Moers Lawyers
www.bvm-law.de

ClaraNet GmbH ▶137
www.claranet.net

Ganz & Stock GbR
www.ganz-stock.de

HOPPENSTEDT & WOLTERS Lawyers
www.contentlaw.de

IEM Consulting Interactive Entertainment & Multimedia
www.iem-consulting.com

markenzeichen GmbH
www.markenzeichen.eu

Weber Networking GmbH
www.weber-networking.de

Wolf & Motoori GmbH
www.wolfmotoori.com

ENTERTAINMENT HARDWARE

Dell GmbH
www.dell.de

MSI Technology GmbH
www.msi-technology.de

Samsung Electronics GmbH
www.samsung.de

EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Games Academy™ GmbH
www.games-academy.de

Goethe University Frankfurt
www.uni-frankfurt.de

Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz
www.uni-mainz.de

Offenbach Academy of Art and Design (HfG)
www.hfg-offenbach.de

Technical University Darmstadt
www.tu-darmstadt.de

University of Applied Sciences Darmstadt
www.h-da.de

University of Applied Sciences Frankfurt
www.fh-frankfurt.de

University of Applied Sciences RheinMain
www.hs-rm.de

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

gamearea-FRM e.V. ▶139
www.gamearea-frm.de

IGDA – International Game Developer Association Frankfurt
www.igda.org/frankfurt-am-main

GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Frankfurt Economic Development GmbH
www.frankfurt-business.net

FrankfurtRheinMain GmbH International Marketing of the Region
www.frm-united.com

HA Hessen Agentur GmbH
www.hessen-agentur.de

INDUSTRY EVENTS

bgf – browsergames forum
www.bgf2010.com

GAMEplaces
www.gameplaces.de

European Innovative Games Award
www.innovative-games.eu

IGDA Frankfurt chapter meetings
www.igda.org/frankfurt-am-main

REGION SPECIFIC:

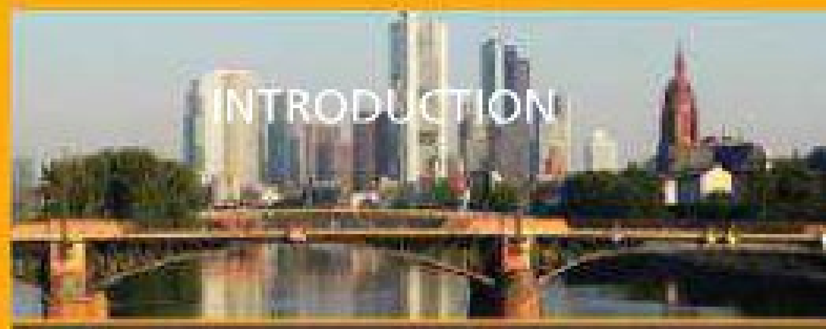
FRANKFURT, GERMANY

It may be the smallest metropolis in the world, but Frankfurt is punching well above its weight. As the European centre for business, finance, transport and even the web, the city's diminutive size belies its importance as a gateway to the rest of Europe and destinations farther afield. This internationalism is reflected in the multicultural, multilingual society that inhabits it, and makes Frankfurt a surprisingly welcoming destination irrespective of whether your trip is for business or pleasure.

This sense of community has allowed developers, and related peripheral industries, to coalesce into a decidedly tight unit. Developers, publishers, production companies, technology startups and internet service providers alike are united in growing the industry both within Frankfurt and on a worldwide scale. What's more, many of these companies' roles are merging: developers Crytek and Keen are delivering technology as well as games; ISP Claranet has moved from basic hosting into end-to-end networking management; and production company Cliffhanger Productions has opened its own dedicated game development division.

This thriving scene also enjoys the full support of government body Frankfurt Economic Development and industry association gamearea, organisations that have recognised the potential in growing community early on and which are prepared to invest in its growth – investment many larger development communities can only envy. While other German cities, such as Hamburg and Berlin, are more readily associated with the game industry, Frankfurt is rapidly asserting itself as one of the most motivated, and indeed active, development scenes in the world.







THE MAIN ATTRACTION

The 'world's smallest metropolis' is home to a growing, but tightly knit, community of developers

Frankfurt's striking skyline belies the city's small size. A cluster of skyscrapers rise from the ground in the old town area and are reflected in the waters of the fast-flowing river Main, which bisects the city. Those skyscrapers house some of the biggest banks in continental Europe, including the European Central Bank itself. The international airport is also one of the most important in the world, connecting Frankfurt to 307 destinations across 109 countries. And Germany's largest data exchange point, the DE-CIX, which handles 35 per cent of all European data traffic, sits at the heart of the city. Centrally located in Europe and with a uniquely expansive infrastructure, Frankfurt is truly international. It's no wonder its residents have affectionately nicknamed it 'Mainhattan'.

Moving around the city reveals much more varied architecture, however – the hotchpotch nature of the buildings due, in no small part, to the severe bombing suffered by Frankfurt during WWII, and its subsequent rebuild. As such, beautiful timber-framed buildings are dwarfed by twisting glass and steel constructs, while rampart-crowned towers that wouldn't look out of place in Disneyland sit among rows of divisive '60s and '70s concrete. But the lack of aesthetic coherence has done nothing to sully the sense of community among Frankfurt's multicultural population, not least those who make up the burgeoning game industry here. That particular community has created its own initiative, gamearea, in order to provide a platform on which to exult its successes and promote the scene internationally. Beginning as a monthly pub meeting, it has quickly grown in to a full-blown industry association, encouraging talent, lobbying the government for financial support and putting its new-found weight behind the European Innovative Games Award.

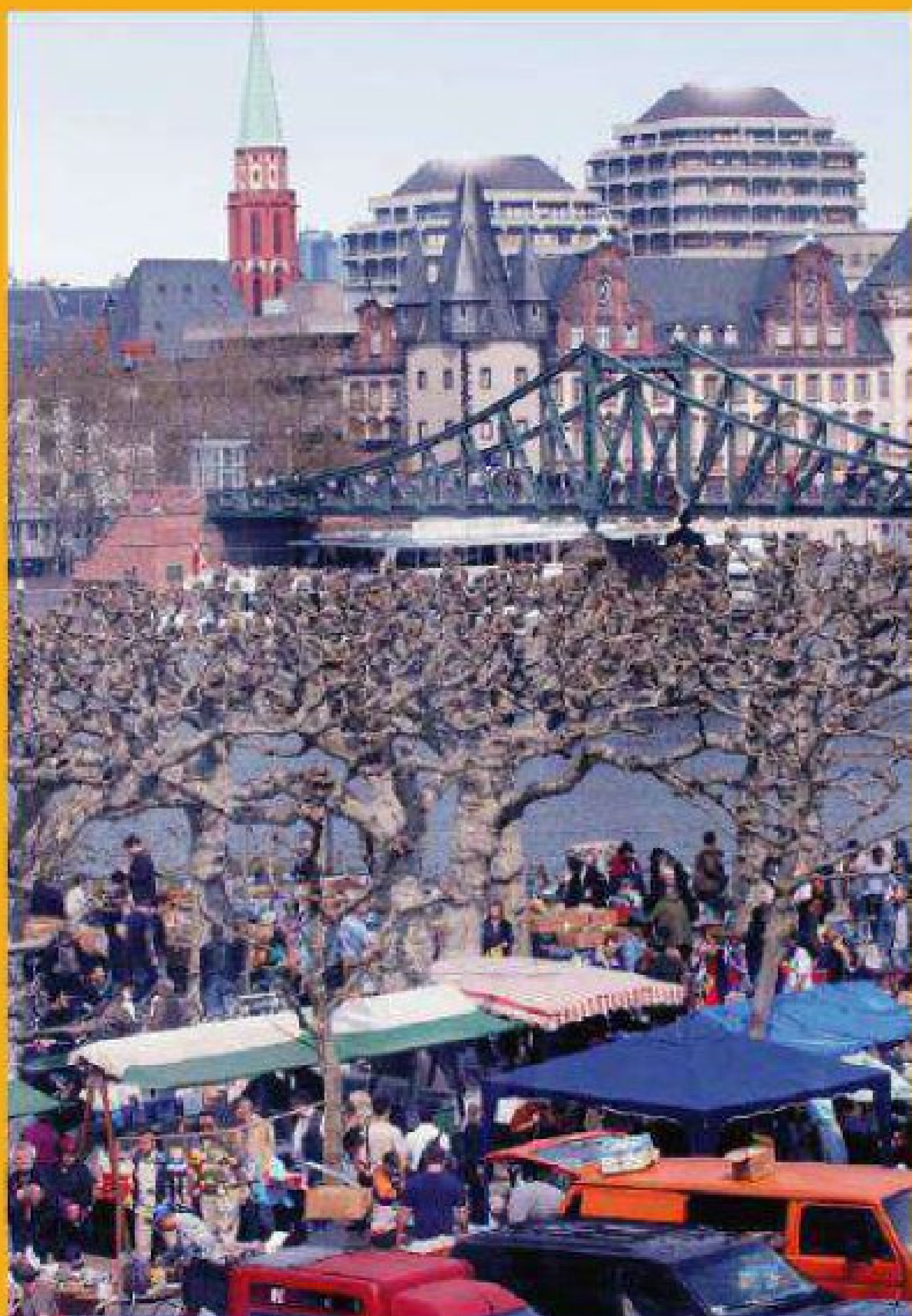
Aware of the local game industry's growing voice, and prepared to listen, Frankfurt has recognised its potential and embraced it. Frankfurt Economic Development works closely with gamearea, as well as the various developers and publishers here, to provide firm foundations on which to build the industry's future. An incubator has been set up to help new game companies get off the ground, while regular workshop sessions give developers the opportunity to meet with other key industries – such as the legal sector – in order to better understand the intricacies of their businesses.

Developers do their bit in return by working closely with educational institutions, teaching at the Games Academy or universities here, while Crytek makes its CryEngine technology available. With so much going on in such a small space, it would perhaps be impossible not to build strong relationships with the companies around you. This is borne out to some degree by the fact that at the end of almost every studio visit during our trip, having said our goodbyes and explained where we're headed next, our erstwhile hosts ask that we pass on their regards to one or more people at the following destination. That we so cheerfully become the least efficient part of Frankfurt's communication network reflects the friendly, open atmosphere that pervades throughout the city. But for all the youthful exuberance, and scrappy underdog attitudes, there is plenty of experience here too. Keen Games has been around since 1993 (albeit under a different name for much of its life), its decision to focus on consoles











early on, bucking the trend for domestic PC development, proving a shrewd one. With the international appeal and broad range of its games, from *Tunnel B1* to *Dance Dance Revolution: Disney Edition*, and current explorations of the console download (*TNT Racing*) and browser-game (*Star Trek: Infinite Space*) markets, Keen looks set to remain at the forefront of the industry.

And, of course, Crytek has now called Frankfurt home for over four years, bringing with it a reputation for world-leading game technology and a wealth of expertise. Deck13, meanwhile, is hoping to use its experience in storytelling to reach a new market with its console RPG, *Venetica*.

As well as international publishers such as bitComposer, Frankfurt also has a robust service industry. Companies such as Cliffhanger and Keyfactor are dedicated to supporting a wide range of publisher and developer needs, from consultancy and testing to full game production and marketing. While the nature of such work necessitates a certain degree of confidentiality, it's telling that these companies embrace the opportunity to share ideas across projects where applicable for the ultimate good of the Frankfurt scene.

With the DE-CIX based here, developers have easy access to networking solutions from companies like Claranet. Based just down the road from Crytek, the ISP turned 'managed service provider' works with developers to improve the networking portions of their productions, even offering a complete hosting service wherein the company will manage and stage the entire game, leaving developers to focus on other aspects of their releases. This easy access to infrastructure and networking services is brought up repeatedly by the developers we visit here as a major advantage when it comes to providing services to their own customers – be it fast turnaround on a proposal or a stable online game environment.

Aware of the local game industry's growing voice, and prepared to listen, Frankfurt has recognised its potential and embraced it

That many companies are in such close proximity is also cited as a boon when it comes to the social aspects of life in Frankfurt, allowing like-minded individuals to easily meet up after work – as a direct result encouraging the exchange of ideas and culture between different developers. It is this aspect of life here that led to gamearea's formation, after all.

But that is not to say that the companies we visit during our tour don't have their own distinctive personalities. Despite the open nature of Frankfurt, developers, publishers and service companies are, at heart, competitors. But it is in the atmosphere of trust and mutual support that Frankfurt's community truly distinguishes itself. By being acutely aware of the big picture, and understanding the benefit of helping each other, the game industry here is safeguarding what looks to be a particularly bright future.





FRANK TALKING

A model of Frankfurt set beneath a huge sheet of glass forms the core of the table in the centre of Frankfurt Economic Development's meeting room. Lit from below, not only does it accurately map the existing high-rise buildings and twisting streets of the city, but also several planned monoliths that will eventually add to the skyline. It's certainly eye-catching. A glance out of the 12th floor window, meanwhile, reveals countless building sites interrupting the landscape. This is a city in a state of flux, one very much focused on development and growth. Joining us on our lofty perch are the head of competence centre creative industries for Frankfurt Economic Development, **Manuela Schiffner**; from Crytek, co-founder and managing director **Avni Yerli**, and PR manager **Jens Schäfer**; Keen Games' development director, **Pete Walentin**; Deck13 creative director **Jan Klose**; coreX3D CEO **Alex Suárez**; and Claranet's sales and marketing director, **Michael Blatz**. Once assembled, the group wastes little time in explaining why the game industry here is growing just as quickly as its host, all without compromising its tenacious sense of community.

What advantages do you think gamearea offers Frankfurt's scene over any other development community?

Pete Walentin: I think the most important thing we've got in gamearea is that we really do have the same goals and will try to achieve them by working together on any field where it's possible.

Jan Klose: One of the key features of Frankfurt is that it's in the middle of Europe, with perfect connections to all the world. You're 12 hours to LA, one hour to Hamburg – you can travel very fast by train in Germany, if you want. And for others it's very easy to come here; sometimes you have a meeting at the airport with people who are just stopping over. Many of Germany's banks are here, and now there are a lot of game companies, too – important developers like Crytek and publishers like Nintendo. So we really have all of the different types of game companies here, and the development of Frankfurt is moving in the right direction the whole time.

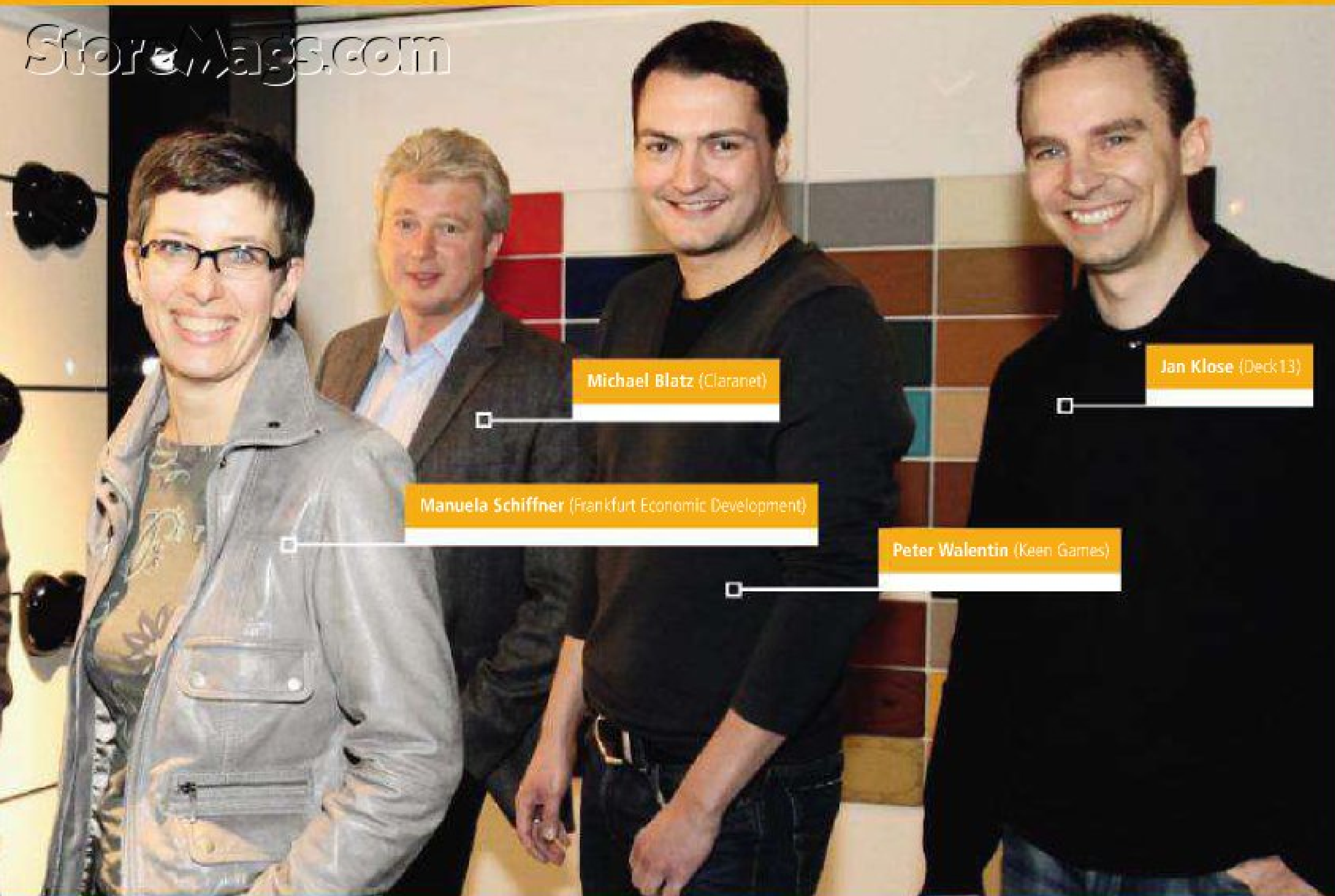
PW: What I learned so far in other areas in Europe where you have development companies is that each company is working more on its own, and they do not share their ideas or have any direction that they would like to go in as a community. The good thing here, at least my personal impression, is that on one hand we are competitors, but I do not feel like we're competitors because we're working in different fields. The culture in each company is different, so we do attract different people, and it's not like others are doing the same kind of game we're doing and we need the same people. So every company has some special things about it which differs from all the other companies. For us, we like that people are attracted by the area, and so I don't have a problem when someone applies for a position at Keen and, say, Deck13, then chooses Deck13 over us. Just the fact that this person has come to the area is great for the development community.

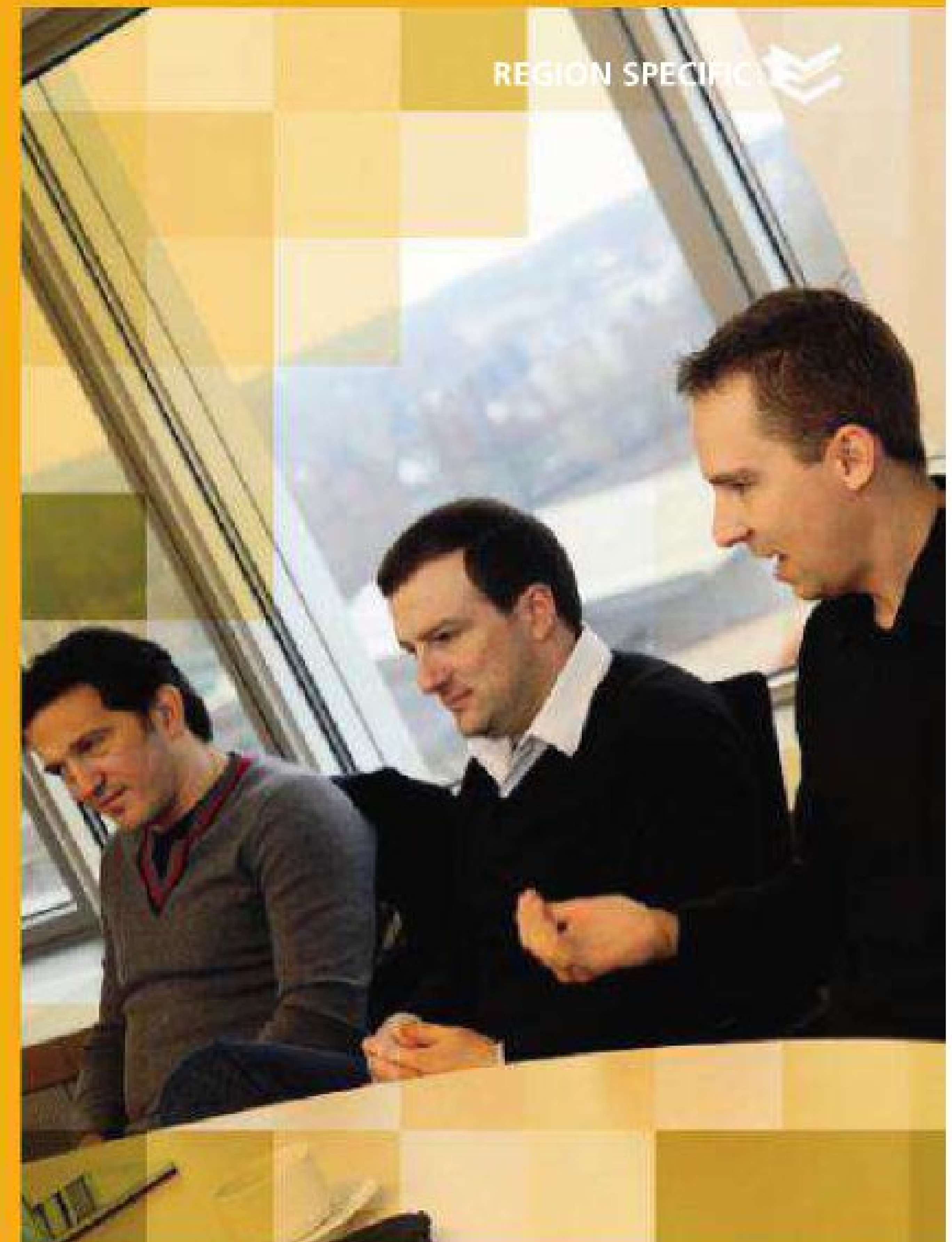
JK: It's great when they all assemble here – in the end it's better, as when people leave their jobs looking for a new opportunity they can stay in the area and go to another company. There's a very vibrant exchange. It's cool for everyone to not have the same people all the time, but really have that exchange of views and ideas. For us it's the same: even if someone is applying for a job at Deck13 and they choose Keen over us because it fitted them better, there's always someone else who feels the opposite. The more people there are here in the area, the more choice we have if we really need someone in a very short timeframe.

Alex Suárez: That's the case for the people who are employed, but also for the freelancers, too. So you get a big network of freelancers who are working for the different companies from day to day, which is also important. But that's the same in any cluster in the world where you have lots of people doing the same thing. So I guess the special thing about Frankfurt is the central placement but also the proximity to the big businesses and banks which are based here, so you're connected to more than just the game industry. For me, that's one of the perfect things about Frankfurt.

Michael Blatz: What I would consider as important is that Frankfurt *does* have a cluster, which isn't self-evident. I mean, there are clusters in other cities, too, like Hamburg. But, for example, we do not have a relative cluster in Berlin, where the media scene is very active. The gaming scene in Berlin is quite good, but there is still no real cluster there, so this makes Frankfurt the base.

Avni Yerli: That's all true, and extremely important. But for us, the most important thing is the international scene. People are flying here from all





Though relatively young on an international scale, Frankfurt's exuberant community is pulling together to ensure that its voice cannot be ignored

over the world, and if they speak English – which is to be expected [laughter] – then they can do everything here. All the taxi drivers speak English, there are no issues in restaurants ordering something – that's not common in other places around Germany; even Berlin isn't as international as Frankfurt is. And that also enables the families, who come with the people who move here to work, to socialise easier than in other places. That makes Frankfurt pretty interesting.

PW: It's really very international. You can find any culture in Frankfurt, any kind of restaurant you'd like, and you have international schools, international kindergarten, and you do have communities from all countries in Frankfurt. It really differs when you go to Berlin or Hamburg – Frankfurt is the most international place in Germany in my opinion, which is useful when it comes to attracting new talent.

Manuela Schiffner: Yeah, it's pretty open-minded; everybody's welcome. I think that's an important thing to mention.

JK: It's linked directly to the connectivity of the city, of course, because you can get here easily. But on the other hand there's the nice bonus that you can also travel home, wherever that is, pretty quickly compared to some other places. So if your family is somewhere else, like in France, you can go there by train from Frankfurt – you're only four hours from Paris by ICE [Germany's high-speed trains].

MB: From an infrastructure point of view, Frankfurt is definitely the capital of internet traffic. With the DE-CIX [Deutscher Commercial Internet Exchange] right down the road from here, it makes sense to be based here, especially if you're doing browser games and need connectivity. In that respect, Frankfurt cannot be replaced by any other city.



> **"For us, at Crytek, the most important thing is the international scene... Even Berlin isn't as international as Frankfurt"**

PW: The good thing about the city as well, and what the gamearea is doing, is that we have a really good relationship with the economic development of Frankfurt, and with the politics here, which helps us to establish ourselves and make the industry more attractive to young talent. This is especially useful in attracting new startups.

MS: We have an incubator for new digital and game companies just 200 metres from here, which has eight companies in it right now.

AY: Crytek moved into Frankfurt in 2006, and after the move what I realised was, in terms of government representatives, the interaction with the game industry has actually been really impressive in terms of trying to understand us, and attending and hosting events, which in Germany is pretty unique. They understand the potential: it's not just the jobs, it promotes innovation, it creates diversity, it creates an art industry – and they're really behind it.

PW: Yeah. And it changed a lot during the last year. If you think about all the discussions we had in Germany – I think six months ago the gamearea met with the Hessen [the state in which Frankfurt is located] Minister of State. We've done a lot to change things and now the city, and the state, knows how important creative people are for the development of Frankfurt and that they are the key to a successful city which continues to grow. It's really a good a place to be right now.

Frankfurt consistently ranks in the top ten places to live in the world. Does that reflect at all on the work/life balance of developers here?

AY: The good thing about our industry is that it's very dynamic, right?

PW: We really take care that people do have their spare time, that they can take care of their family, because that's part of life and pretty important. I think Frankfurt has a lot to offer people in their spare time, but as we all know there *are* development cycles where you need to put in some extra hours. It is not all about work here, though, and you see that when we have developer roundtables, or a meeting



in a bar where developers from different companies come together and have a nice evening drinking some beer.

AY: In terms of development challenges I think it's every bit the same, and I don't think that is affected by location. I think what I find impressive, though it's not obvious at first glance, is – you mentioned the top ten rankings – that's actually very consistent on an international scale. When we first said we intended to move to Frankfurt, people said: "Oh, it's a crazy idea – it's just banks there, blah blah", but when you learn about the city more, you realise it has some really nice places. It has lots of cultures and all kinds of food. I think all the theatres run English movies. The quality of life developers have here is very high outside of their work. Every weekend has an event, and there's a lot of action going on in the city which our people are very active in.

Jens Schäfer: It's also great for families because it's a rather small city, even though there's lots to do.

AY: The city itself has about 80,000 people living in it, but if you widen to circle to five kilometres, I think there are five-and-a-half million people – it's huge in terms of both the population and in terms of what it can offer. I don't think that anyone could complain here that there's nothing to do!

JK: And, of course, when you're inside Frankfurt, which I think most companies are, you've really got the advantage that the core of the city is really small – everything seems to be 20 minutes away. So if you're working long hours at the end of a project, the good thing is that you're not in some remote district or a really industrial area where there's nothing to do when you're finished with work. Normally you're really in the action, and you can go out, take the tram, and in five minutes you can be with colleagues or friends having a beer.

PW: Frankfurt is the smallest metropolis in the world – you don't have to commute an hour in each direction every day, and it's affordable to live in the city. Also, if you look at Offenbach [just south of the river Main, next to Frankfurt], which is the smaller sister of Frankfurt, it has a very artistic scene with lots going on in fashion and art and whatever you can think of, so it's very vibrant being here. And the music scene is awesome. It really is true that no matter what your interests are, you'll find people who share the same ideas you have.

JK: Sometimes it just feels like a model of a really big city; everything is compressed into a really small city. It's like a computer game level, you know – everything's there but you only have a couple of minutes to walk there! [Laughter.]

JK: There are some people who come to visit us who say they couldn't find a hotel because of, say, a trade fair in Frankfurt, and they're all booked up, and we tell them that the area around Frankfurt is full of nice hotels. It's all connected with the outskirts, and as the trains run pretty smoothly, there aren't many traffic jams. We're always complaining, of course, when they don't run on time! [Laughter.] But I think, compared to other cities, it's pretty accurate.

In cities like London and Reijkavik, for example, game developers pull backend programming staff from banks – is there a similar relationship between developers and the banks here?

AY: I know they *play* games a lot here. [Laughter.] I can imagine on the networking side of things there are opportunities, and I think we have already received a couple of CVs from people from a bank. I can certainly see it happening, but first of all they need to be aware of the game industry.

PW: Another interesting point is that we have all the international law firms here, and as we all know in management, in gaming you have a lot to do with law and contracts, so that's helpful as well.

AY: That's actually a very good point. The other thing is that all the universities in the area are very interested in gaming and gaming technology. They've started building programmes on the topics of game development and art creation. Internationally it might feel a little bit late, but they are closing the gap very fast. They realise that there are a lot of companies here, and the students are very interested in the area, and we've actually talked to a couple of universities to asked them to push certain things, or they've come to us and said, "What do you think about this?" We bring that together with gamearea – there is a lot that can be done which helps both education and the game industry.

AS: For instance, the University of Applied Sciences has a whole group of students working on CryEngine, which Avni didn't mention, but that's really good for Crytech because people get educated in their engine, but it's also very good for the industry here because people get in touch with great engines.

AY: That's the primary purpose. [Laughter.] No, seriously, the thing is, CryEngine goes out to 250 universities worldwide, but here in Frankfurt the schools get it as well. The local education facilities get preferred treatment, obviously, because we can give them our time and do all kinds of things here, and we see a lot of interesting student projects. They're not always doing core games – sometimes they're doing other crazy stuff, primarily around social gaming. You can see a great deal of potential; it just needs to be awakened. But going back to the banks, recently I've seen that they are all interested in the game industry, and now they're looking to cooperate with developers and potentially offer them financing. There have been a lot of projects recently in which they try to understand our industry better, try to understand development better and try to create the financial tools to provide for developers. Historically, if you went to a bank, unless you have a lot of money you can put down as security…

AS: So you don't need the bank… [Laughter.]

AY: Somehow that seems to be changing now, which is very encouraging. I hope it continues.

What's your take on the development community's relationship with education?

AY: I don't know how it works in other countries, but usually the people running courses are from the industry and perhaps know it better than the traditional professor. In my opinion, that's key. And sometimes they will ask us to do workshops, too.

PW: We don't have the huge problem, which is in the UK, where there are so many private schools teaching or offering courses to become a game designer. I think that as our educational system for games is not as established as in the UK, we've luckily not reached that point and we have to tell the educational institutions what we need. And I think from all of the companies sitting here, there are employees teaching at the Games Academy or offering courses at a university, so we are there and we're talking to the people who structure the education and try to tell them what our interests are.

JK: I would say that it's changed quite a bit over the last five years since those schools were founded. We used to get applications from people saying, 'OK, I am now an educated game designer and I want to





"We don't have the huge problem of so many private schools teaching or offering courses to become a game designer"

Having such an established internet hub here must offer a huge opportunity for IT and game companies to work closely together, too.
MB: For us it's very obvious: of course, if you have a very active scene like the game industry right in front of your door, you have more and more interesting customers that need exactly what you offer. What the gaming industry needs – now, especially – is flexibility, reliability and, of course, cost efficiency in everything they do. This affects both the network as well as the hosting, which is why we're getting pretty close to this scene, because it's very attractive to us and, of course, companies like us are necessary for the industry.

The community here is clearly very close-knit and supportive, but how much inter-company sharing is there in terms of technology or ideas?
PW: As far as I know, it is. [Laughter.]
JK: A publisher wanted a special console development from us, and we said: "OK, we don't have any experience on that side". But we do not go to Keen Games and talk about technology or how they do certain things, we say: "Maybe we can work together – you can do the console development for this project". So I think it's more project-wise that we really collaborate and share technology, but the basic way of doing things is employing programmers and everything staying very much at the companies themselves. So it's not like Keen can have three of our main programmers for the next couple of months who will show them how to do stuff – that doesn't work. But the other way around, it does.
PW: As we're in the same industry, we're facing the same problems. So, I don't have a problem with emailing Avni and asking him about some points – maybe he has some ideas or thoughts on a particular issue. You have to be a little bit relaxed and confident in what you're doing, and then it's not a problem to talk to each other. And, of course, we do not tell each other the secrets we have – nobody does this. But it's not necessary. The most important thing is that you know there are people you can go to, ask them a question and they're not just looking down on you and saying: "What an idiot".
AY: I think this is actually pretty special in this region. Obviously, we're not going to share game concepts, but we share experiences – how is it working with this company? How is it working with that company? And issues on PS3, Xbox or whatever. So those kind of discussions are really good, and that happens over the phone, in an organised meeting or perhaps just an email. But that kind of sharing is really important.

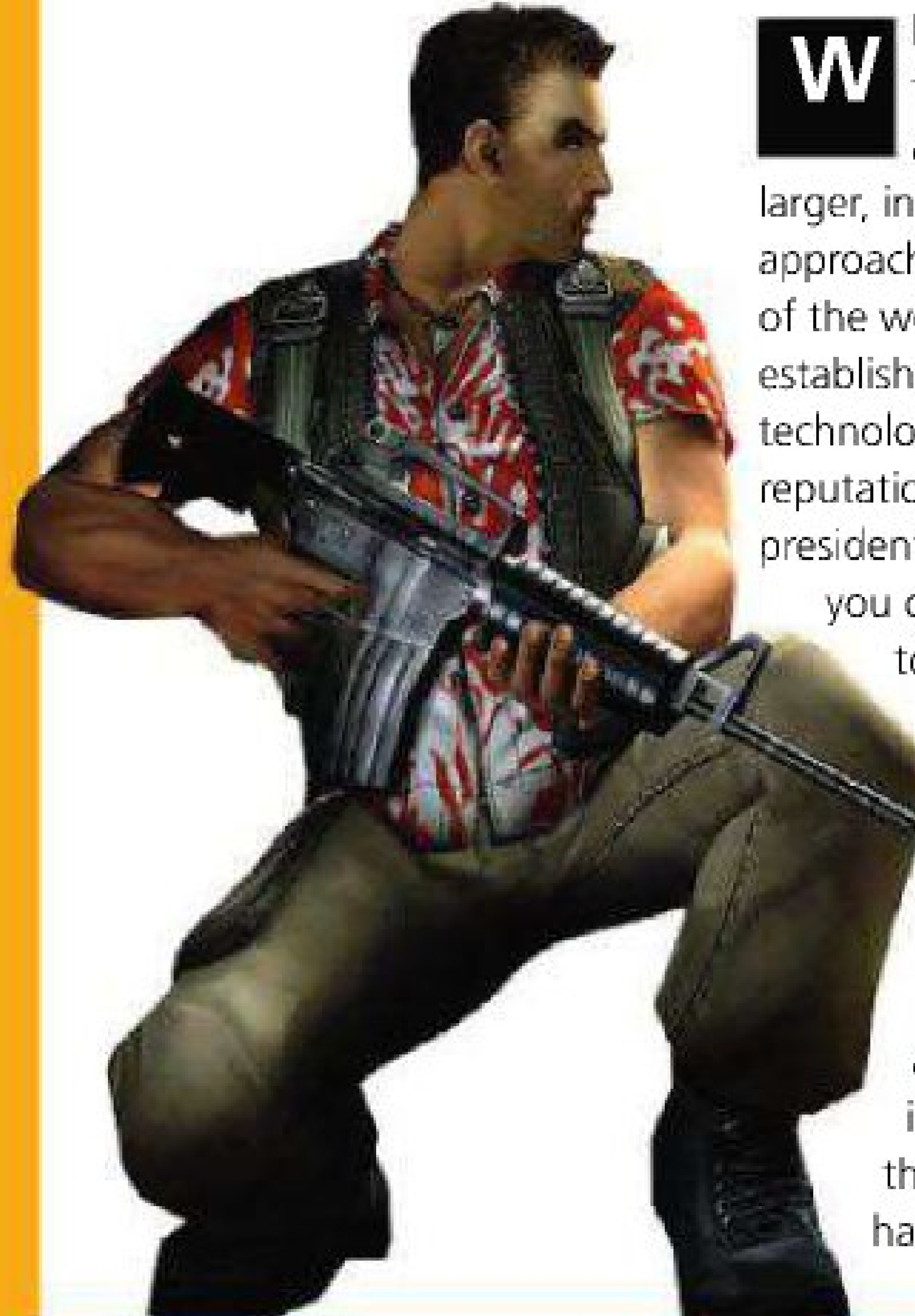
do game design at your company', and we say, 'OK, what's game design to you?' and they respond, 'Designing a game! I know everything about it! Give me a game and I'll design it!' And we have to tell them that's just not how it works. But now, when someone applies for the same position, he's much more realistic, he knows what to expect, so he was obviously educated much better. And it's because the people from the industry teach them what to expect as well as well as what's important to developers, and now we're really happy about people who apply to us as game designers. I think we reached the stage, for the first time maybe, during the last two or three years, where we can really use those people. It's definitely a change for the better.
AS: There are different university types, too. One is very applied, the other's very theoretic. It depends on the tutors who fits better to which university, but usually students spend a few years doing crazy things with the engine and then apply that at the end. All the applications that we got on the game side, it's like you said, five years ago expectations were inaccurate, but now they know exactly what they have to do.
PW: On the other hand you have to take into account that you do need more and more very specialised people working in very specific fields in game development. So what we usually experience when we recruit people from the university is that it takes six months until they get used to our workflow and tools. And especially when you're developing for consoles, the universities do not have any of that hardware available to them, so they have to get used to the SDKs, etc. So, as an employer in a company you have to be aware that you do not get finished people from university or any other institution like that, so you have to continue the education. It's part of your business to teach them what you need them to know to be proficient and productive for your company.

What has made Frankfurt sit up and recognise the importance of the game industry so early in its life here?
AY: I think the influential decision-making politicians understood the potential in the industry. They understand the benefits that it can bring to the city in establishing new culture and the positive effects it can have on the economy. It's a job innovator, it's a technology innovator and it's a catalyst for multiple businesses around it, so through this synergy other companies can benefit and people have realised this. Step by step, they've enabled us to build the industry, and while I think there is still a lot of work to be done, in the short time to where we are today it's really impressive.
MS: Thanks for saying this! [Laughter.] I think the events that we do bringing people together, and keeping in touch with the press, has generated a buzz and suddenly people are saying, "Ah, there is something here, and they're pretty cool companies – let's keep an eye on it". So, more and more, people recognise that there is an industry with huge potential growing here that we should be proud of, and that we have to push. And companies from other industries start to take an interest as a result.
AY: I think it reflects the openness and awareness of the city and the environment.
PW: Our goal is to take over all the states!
MS: A nice, friendly takeover! [Laughter.]

CRYTEK

Known for pushing the limits of PC hardware, this studio is now turning its attentions to other markets

- **NAME:** Crytek
- **LOCATION:** Frankfurt
- **FOUNDED:** 1999
- **EMPLOYEES:** 320
- **URL:** www.crytek.com/
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Far Cry, Crysis, Crysis 2, WarFace*



While many German developers were already turning their attentions to the free-to-play and console markets in order to reach a larger, international audience, Crytek took a different approach: exporting German PC culture to the rest of the world. With *Far Cry* and *Crysis*, the developer established itself as a world leader in game technology and simultaneously earned an unwanted reputation for elitism. But as Crytek co-founder, president and CEO **Cevat Yerli** explains: "Technically, you could play *Crysis* on a $400 PC, but in order to max it out you had to buy a $2,000 or $3,000 PC – the thing is, we were trying to make a game that was future friendly, not something that you would want to max out now!"

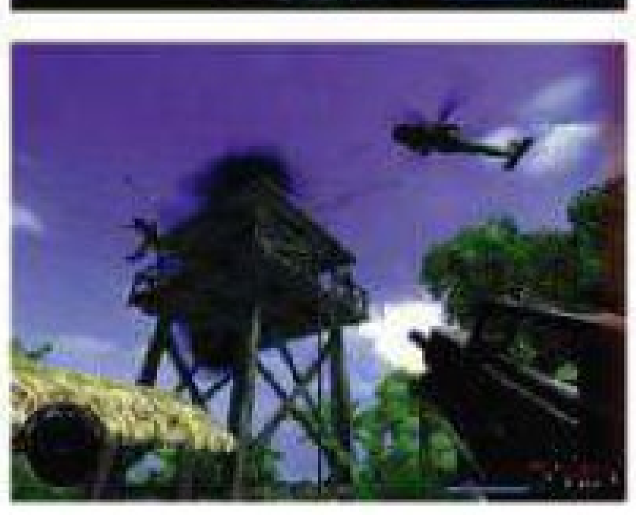
Despite '*Crysis* on full' becoming the unofficial holy grail of PC gaming, Crytek is actually concerned with scalability and, more importantly, accessibility. It's for that reason that the studio, armed with CryEngine 3, has only now turned its gaze to console and free-to-play games. With *Crysis 2* and *Warface*, the company is expanding the reach of its IP and aiming to raise the expectations of the respective markets. Of course, *Crysis 2* will still serve as a benchmark for PC gaming, and the most dedicated will still assemble rigs capable of running the game at full capacity – but those without that kind of budget will still be able to enjoy it. In Crytek's view, besting competitors is an irrelevance; it's about offering the best possible experience on available technology.

That's not to say that there's any whiff of arrogance here, though: as we're introduced to staff at the studio there is a palpable sense of excitement and pride with regard to these new projects, but also a consistent, polite modesty. In fact, the only point at which we notice any hint of aggrandising is on clocking the three full-size plastic models next to reception: Superman stands at the back, Aragorn just in front. And at the head of the queue? An imposing Nanosuit, of course.









Far Cry (above), Crytek's debut title released in 2004, was a convincing statement of intent. The game raised the bar for PC graphics, offering lush greenery as well as hitherto-unseen freedom of choice in a genre typified by tight corridors







Co-produced by Crytek Seoul, *WarFace* (above), Crytek's near-future online military shooter, is the company's first foray into the free-to-play market. The game will debut in Korea and move to other Asian markets. Unfortunately, no plans yet exist to bring it to the west

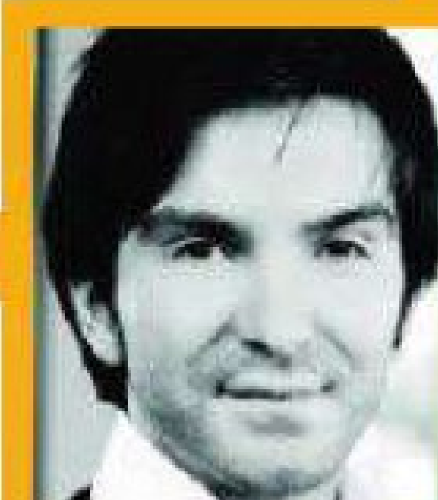






Crytek's spacious Frankfurt headquarters are located north of the river, down the road from Claranet, in an area of the city filled with expensive car dealers





Interview:
Cevat Yerli

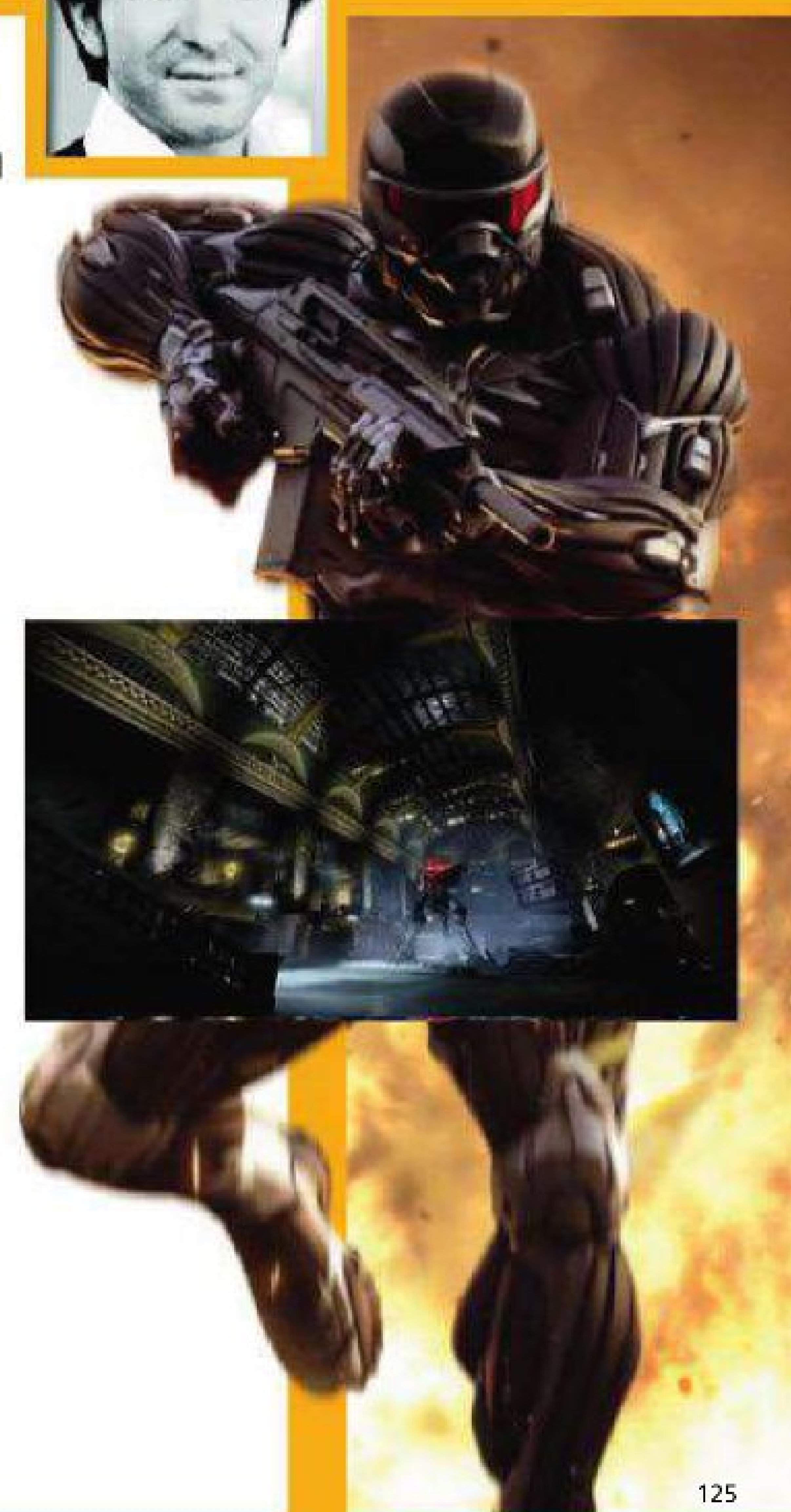
President and CEO

For the first time, Crytek is producing console and free-to-play games. Is this indicative of a flagging high-end PC market?
The PC market is certainly going through a difficult period, but I think this transition will actually help. The PC is fantastic for online connectivity, and you have a lot of users still going into Facebook and social experiences generally. What we're trying to do is increase the quality of free-to-play games generally, as well as making our games more accessible. When we can raise the quality, still achieve that accessibility and transform the business model at the same time, then I think that's a formula for success.

Why did Crytek decide to move from Coburg to Frankfurt in 2006?
We researched cities, including Frankfurt, Berlin and Munich and even some outside of Germany, and in terms of living quality and infrastructure, Frankfurt was very strong. Frankfurt is the hub for Europe's internet, but also a physical hub in terms of travelling worldwide and around Europe.

Crytek is a very international company – how did you avoid appealing only to the PC-centric domestic market?
Right from the beginning, we decided that our official language would be English, our philosophy international and our minds open to world. So when we're designing games, I try to not care about any domestic market whatsoever – I'm thinking: will it appeal globally or not? We have people from many different nationalities that are working here in Frankfurt – it's more than the United Nations! [Laughs.] But despite all the languages spoken here, everyone uses English to connect and exchange. And those people are influencing, in one way or another, what we do here in this company and what gets exported out.

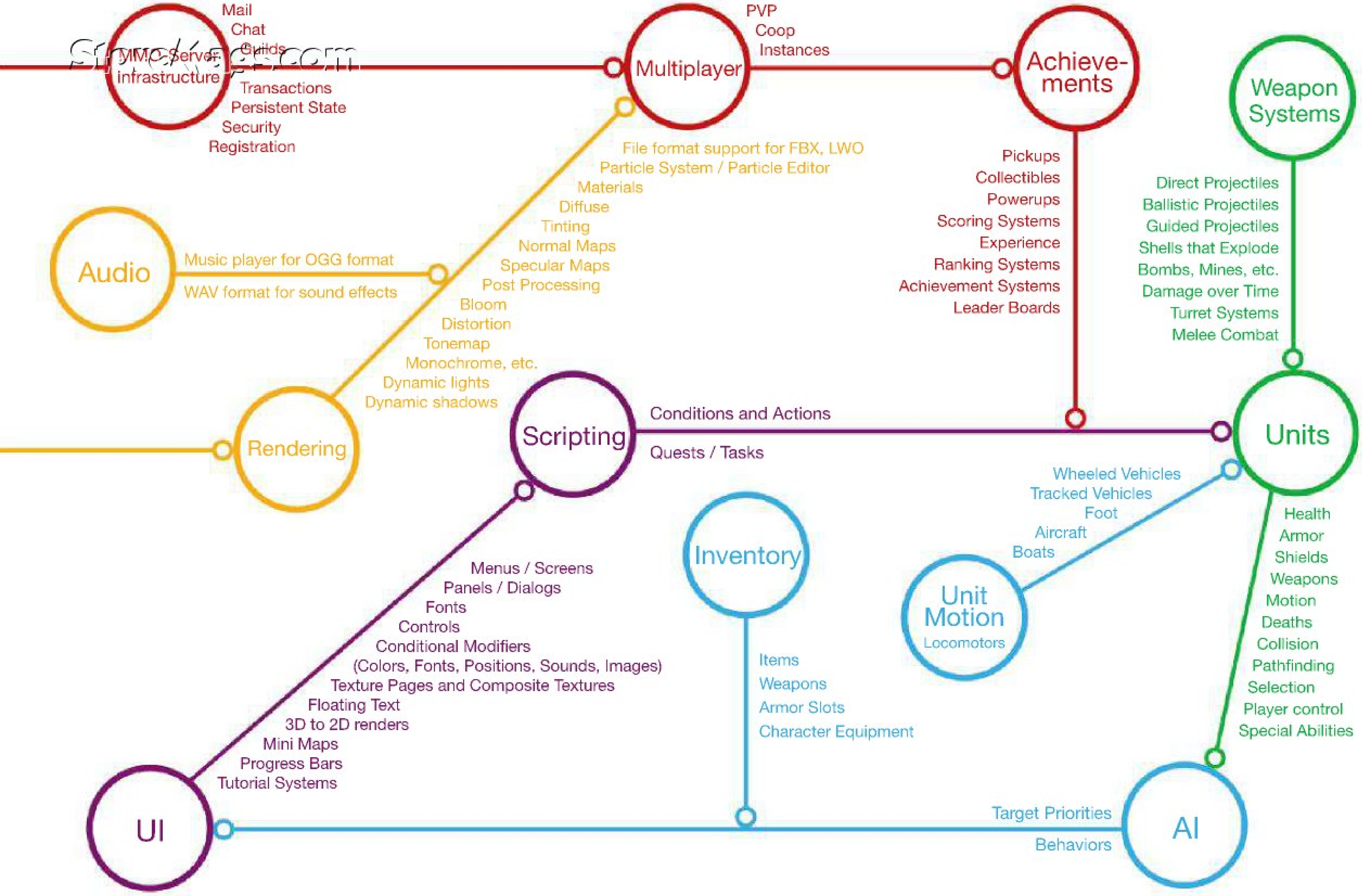
Now that id Software and Epic have flexed their muscles on iOS, are you interested in joining the fray?
You might be surprised what we'll do soon. Mobile is interesting, yes, but as always I like to sit back a little bit and watch what's happening, even if there's an advantage in being the first mover; we did this with consoles, and with the free-to-play market. What are the mind shifts? What are the user behaviour changes? And if you really look at those, then Epic and id's releases wouldn't happen today as they don't make sense yet. They created a short-term burst of 'Wow, that's amazing!' But you're left wondering, other than as a proof of concept, 'why'? Everybody has their reasons, and I'm not judging that, but the business models, the services, the infrastructures – they aren't really there yet. I'm looking at it from a holistic perspective: if we offer CryEngine on iOS, what is the benefit versus those other engines? Do we get any benefit from mobility? And do we benefit from Apple's infrastructure and touchscreens? So from that perspective, it needs a bit more time. But it's clear that online and mobile are more or less the same thing, so we are looking at addressing it a bit differently to id and Epic.




WHAT'S
YOUR
SUPER
POWER?
Crytek is always looking for the superheroes of tomorrow. Designers, Artists, Programmers, Animators, ... If you are passionate about your superpower and want to share the excitement and enthusiasm that we feel for creating great games, then we would love to hear from you.
CURRENT JOB OFFERS
R&D TOOLS ENGINEER | Frankfurt, Germany
R&D ANIMATION PROGRAMMER | Frankfurt, Germany
SENIOR R&D SOFTWARE ENGINEER | Nottingham, UK
DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR | Kiev, Ukraine
LEAD GAME ENGINEER | Kiev, Ukraine
ART DIRECTOR | Kiev, Ukraine



SENIOR ONLINE PROGRAMMER | Kiev, Ukraine
ART DIRECTOR | Budapest, Hungary
SENIOR NETWORK ENGINEER | Budapest, Hungary
SENIOR ANIMATION ENGINEER | Budapest, Hungary
SENIOR GAME DESIGNER | Budapest, Hungary
and more ...



The coreX3D Technology is a complete system for creating MMOs and online worlds that brings the quality of retail video games to the web-browser providing massive experience to your audience.

core X player

coreX3D Group - Los Angeles - Frankfurt - contact: +49 69 5780 4912 or contact@coreX3D.com - more information: www.coreX3D.com

COREX3D GROUP

A technology company that promises to further democratise browser game creation

NAME:
coreX3D
LOCATION:
Frankfurt and LA
FOUNDED: 2005
EMPLOYEES: 27
URL:
www.coreX3D.com





The company's modular technology will allow developers to customise the backend of browser games to fit the needs of the project. While MMOG and RTS flavours of the tech already exist, more are planned

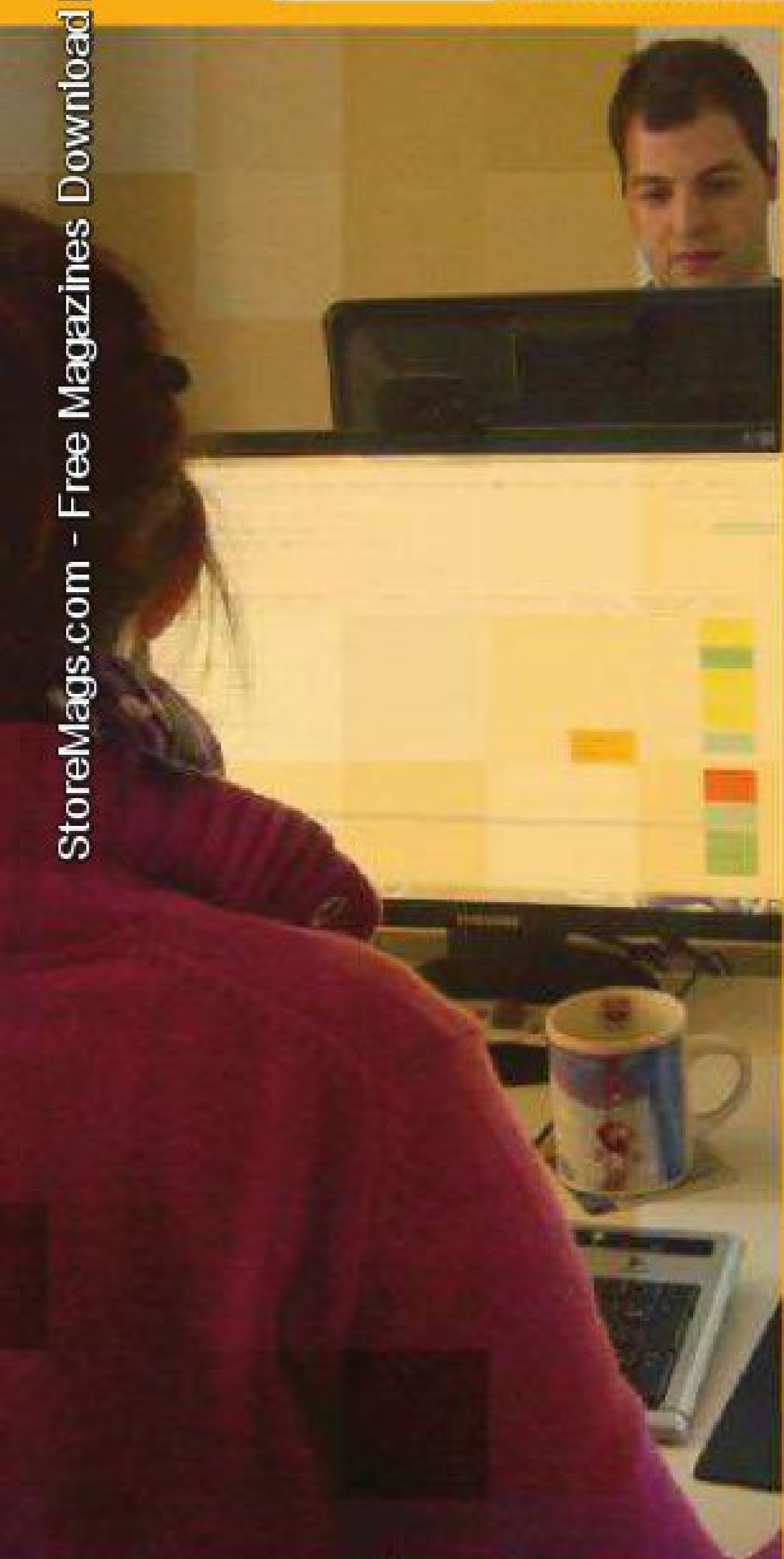


CEO



CTO





Interview: Alex Suárez and Martin Hoffesommer

With the burgeoning browser game market becoming ever more crowded, and as a result more competitive, coreX3D aims to mitigate the risk to developers. Its solution is an integrated system for creating browser-based MMOGs combined with a revenue-share scheme that reduces upfront costs. Company CEO **Alex Suárez** and CTO **Martin Hoffesommer** talk us through why their system isn't just another engine.

Why did you choose to create technology exclusively for browser games?

Alex Suárez : What we like about browser games is that it's instant fun; you navigate to the website and you're already in the game.

Martin Hoffesommer: There's the really low barrier to entry – anybody can go to the web page and play the game right there. The most interesting thing for me as a developer is, with online games in general but particularly browser-based games, that they're more of a dialogue between the developer and the people that are actually enjoying the game.

Do you still see Unity and Flash as competitors, or are you aiming to operate in an entirely different sector?

MH: What traditionally gets called the 'engine' – things like rendering, audio and networking – is just a portion of what you actually need to make a browser or online game. There's a lot of stuff going on behind the scenes when it comes to asset management, asset delivery, the backend database, game logic, admin panels, statistics and payment solutions that usually are not really part of what you get when you just think of an engine. The coreX3D system provides all of this. So we don't see Unity, Flash or Unreal as competitors, we see those as a different take on what you can use to build an online game.

Do you think bespoke engines are becoming less important outside of triple-A retail projects?

MH: Yeah, I think so. If you look ten years back, middleware was almost unknown then, but now it's already a commodity. If you project that ahead, I think engines will be more of a commodity as well, and then it's really just about the content in the game differentiating it, absolutely.

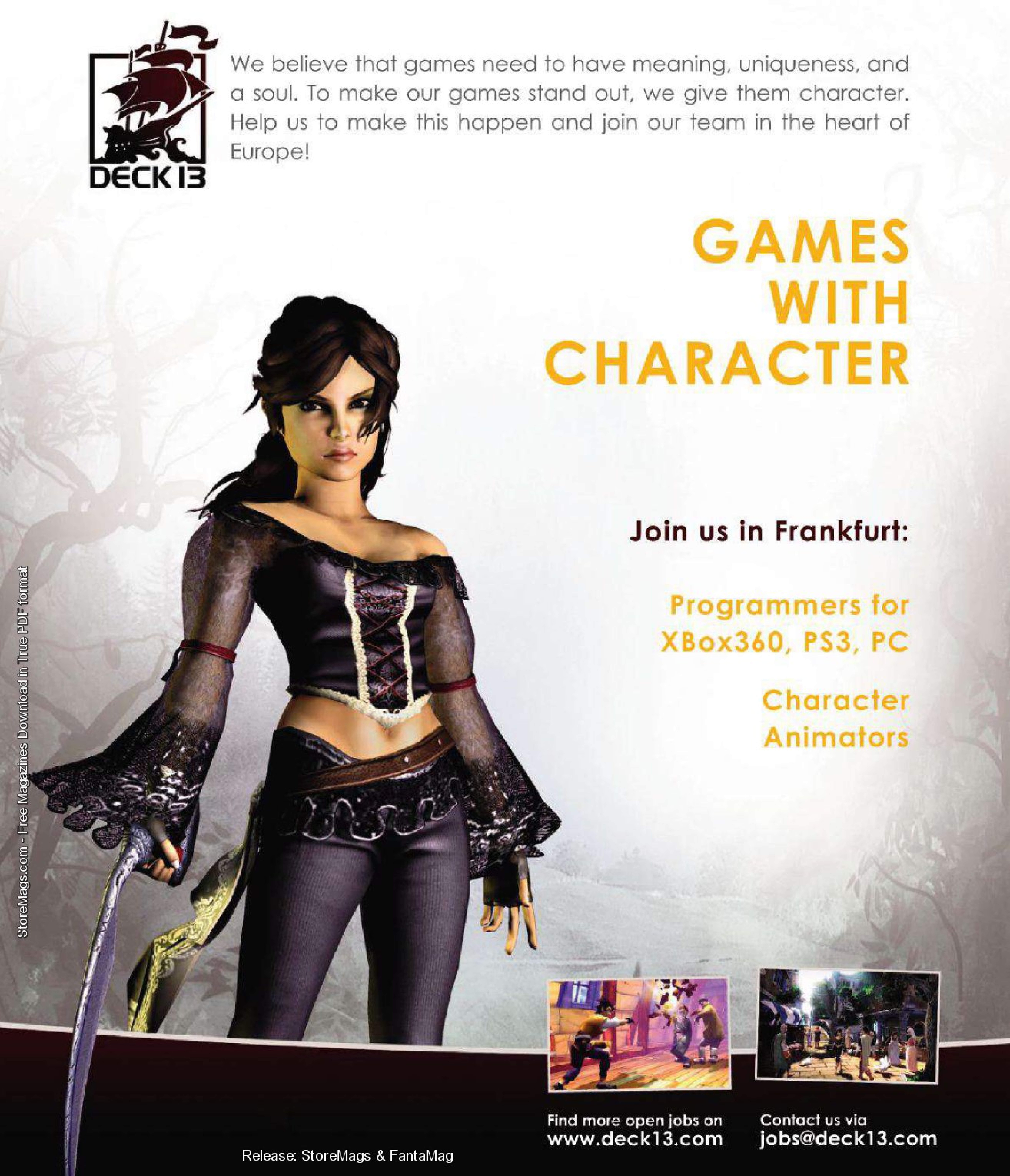
AS: The thing about our technology is that with every title that we're doing, we're putting in more ideas of how to achieve a community, and how to involve and manage them.

MH: It's not an engine – I think that's the most critical thing. That's probably what attracted me to join the company in the first place and leave EA. After talking to these guys earlier in the year and seeing what they were up to, and what they were trying to build – not just another Unity/Unreal/whatever engine, but actually a whole environment for developers to work in – I thought it was a pretty cool idea.

Do you have any plans to expand functionality to iOS or Android platforms?

AS: We can't speak about that yet.

MH: You can hint a little bit about it, though, with a big wink. [Laughter.] There is something in the works, definitely, for the iOS devices, and we're looking into the Android stuff as well, but that's a little bit further down the road. The solution we're working on should allow developers to target the PC and other platforms at the same time.


DECK 13
We believe that games need to have meaning, uniqueness, and a soul. To make our games stand out, we give them character. Help us to make this happen and join our team in the heart of Europe!
GAMES WITH CHARACTER
Join us in Frankfurt:
Programmers for XBox360, PS3, PC
Character Animators
Find more open jobs on www.deck13.com
Contact us via jobs@deck13.com

DECK13

The point-and-click adventure specialist is embracing new genres in order to reach new audiences

NAME: Deck13
LOCATION: Frankfurt
FOUNDED: 2001
EMPLOYEES: 40
URL: www.deck13.com
SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY: *Ankh, Jack Keane, Venetica*







Deck13's staff are passionate about telling stories, whatever genre the company chooses to tackle. Press coverage for *Venetica* currently serves as wall decor

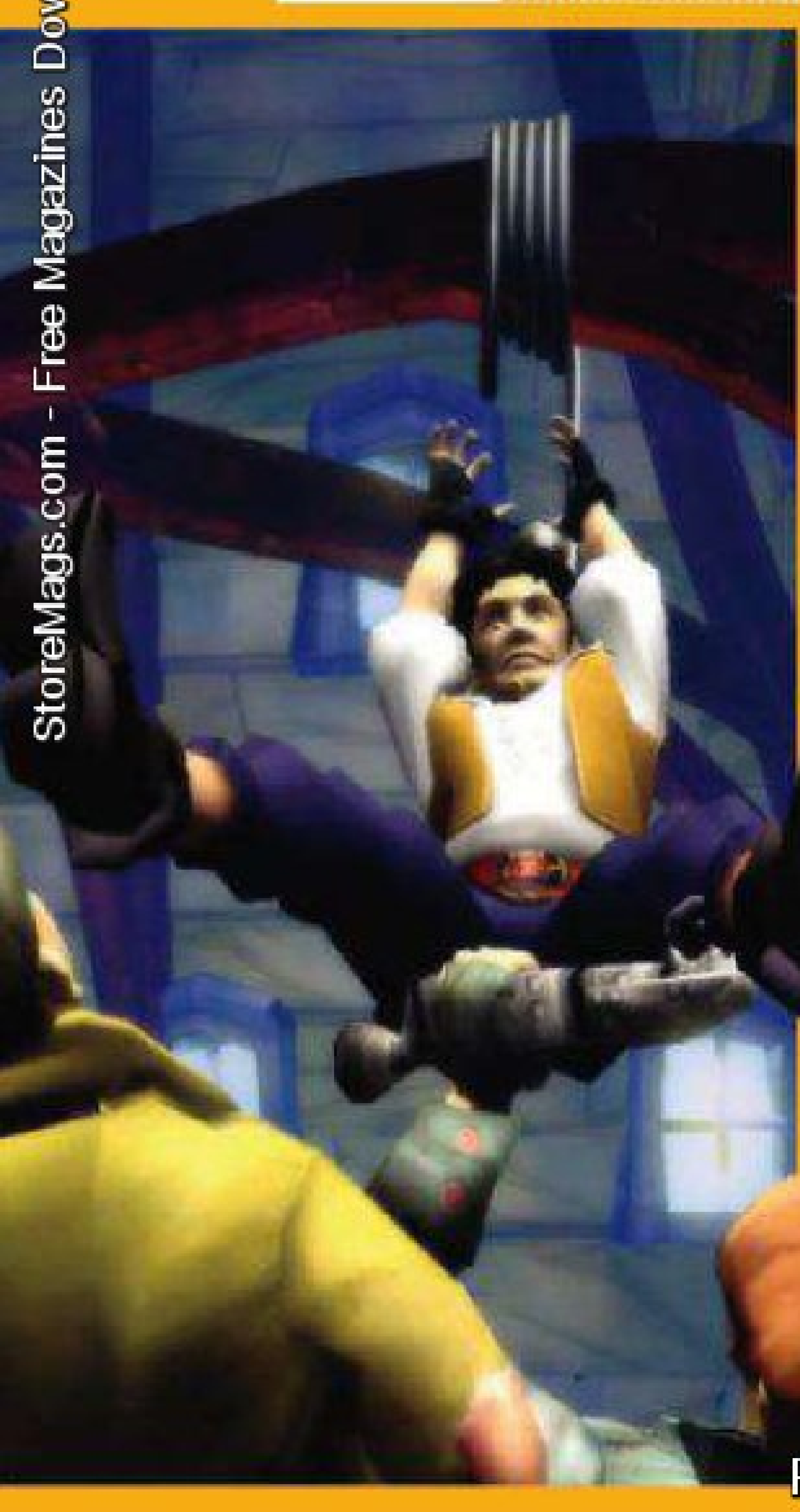




Interview: Jan Klose

Creative director

Though founded as Triggerlab in 2001, the company was renamed Deck13 just one year later, becoming a point-and-click specialist in the process. While adventures have suffered little decline in popularity within Germany, Deck13 is now turning its attentions to new markets and new genres with its console RPG, *Venetica*. We sit down with its creative director, **Jan Klose**, to discuss adventure, roleplay and the importance of character.



Deck13 made its name with games like *Jack Keane* (below) and *Ankh* (bottom), and is now entering the RPG genre with *Venetica* (centre)







Why are adventure games still popular in Germany, despite having fallen away in other territories?

I think they had a rough time because they were losing contact with what is cool about games. On the one hand that's freedom, but the systems in adventures are the opposite of freedom because it's a predefined story and you need to find out how the story was written in order to solve it. And the other thing is that they were once graphical leaders – look at the old LucasArts games, they were beautiful – but then came 3D and it all changed. People tried to do 3D adventure games, but the thing that's really unique about the genre is the soul of the games. The artwork could really be appreciated, it was almost magical. But trying that with 3D… It works for spaceships, guns, but not for characters. And I think it was only in 2004 that PCs were able to display 3D characters that really had that soul again. But by that time, the market was already wiped away. I think adventures will come back, but not as the genre it was ten years ago, and I think we still need to find a way to tell a great story but still give the player freedom.

What did you think of Quantic Dream's approach with *Heavy Rain*?

I really like the idea, but personally, I don't think this is the ultimate way to go because it is still replaying someone else's story. I really appreciate what they've done, because I think it's doing a lot in terms of making people aware of the kinds of games that might be out there. From the gameplay side, however, I would say it's lacking… gameplay! [Laughs.]

What can Deck13 bring to the RPG genre?

I think the Germans have a very specific perception of roleplaying games: they like a knight, with his sword, in the dark forest with a dark castle filled with orcs… That's not particularly interesting to us, so when we tried to sell *Venetica* – which is set in a dream version of Venice, where you play the daughter of Death attempting to restore balance after he has been cheated – we faced a problem: Germans said: "Er, where's my knight?", and the rest of the world said: "Deck who?" [Laughs.] But I think RPGs can be very international, and that roleplaying is simply state-of-the-art gaming. You have a character that you can develop, you can move freely through a gameworld and accept quests or side-quests as you like, and it has a strong story behind it. You see many of these aspects in games like *GTA* or *RDR*. Are they action games? Are they action adventures? Are they actually RPGs? I think roleplaying will blend more and more with other genres. And I think this is why we are moving a little away from adventure games because it doesn't really fit into a this free playing idea.


keen
HELLO WORLD
keengames.com

KEEN GAMES

Frankfurt's oldest studio is staying one step ahead through agility and an international outlook

- **NAME:** Keen Games
- **LOCATION:** Frankfurt
- **FOUNDED:** 2005 (1993 as Neon Software)
- **EMPLOYEES:** 55
- **URL:** www.keengames.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Tunnel B1, Legend Of Kay, Dance Dance Revolution: Disney Edition, Star Trek: Infinite Space, G-Force*



Keen Games' awards shelf features German Game Developer Awards for *Legend Of Kay* and *Anno: Create A New World*





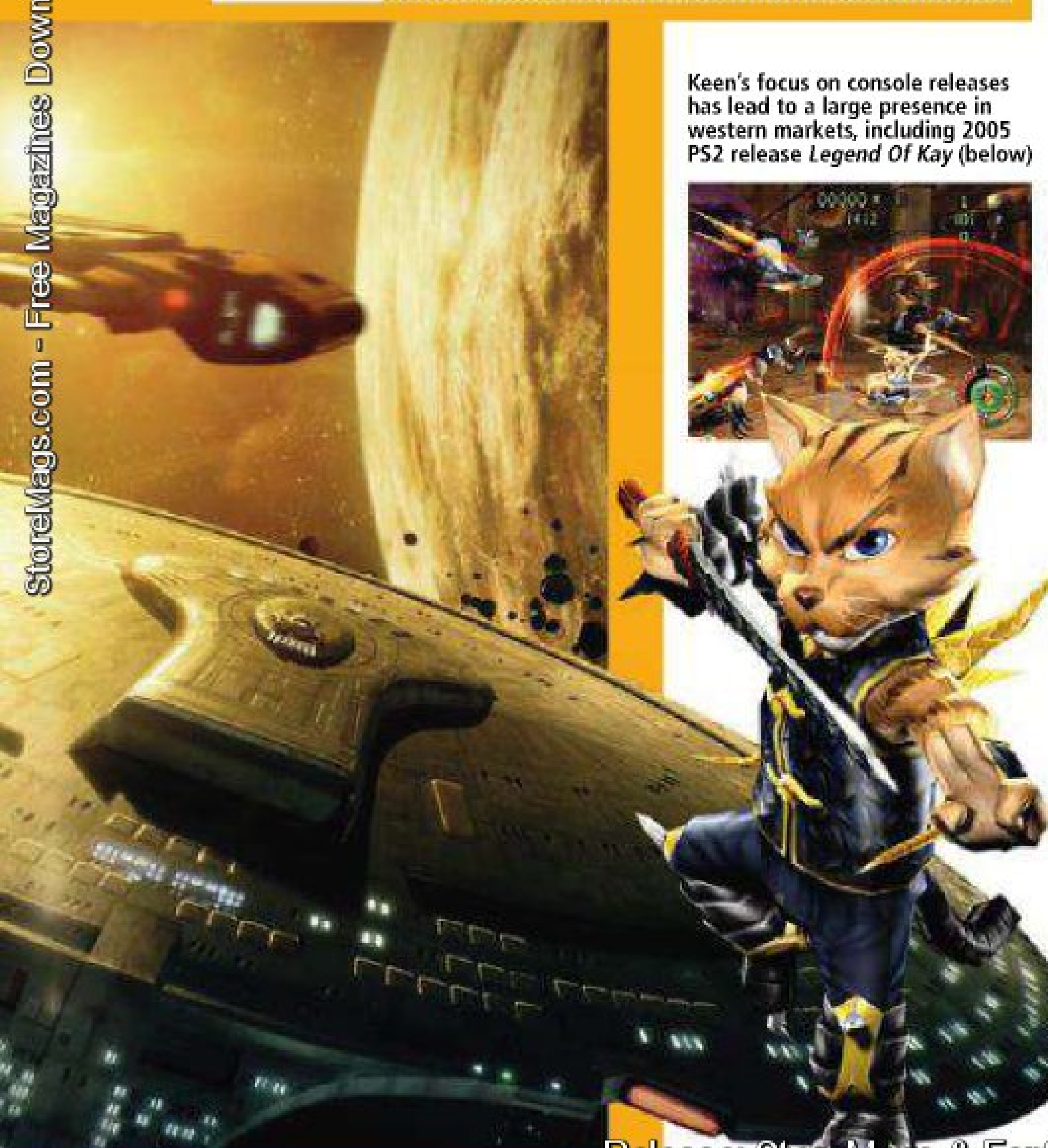




Interview: Pete Walentin and Jan Jöckel

Development director ■ MD ■

Formed from the ashes of *Tunnel B1* and *Legend Of Kay* developer Neon Software, Keen Games is one of the most established developers in Germany, with a track record that spans a variety of platforms. We meet with its development director, **Pete Walentin**, and managing director **Jan Jöckel** to find out how Keen appeals to an international market.



Keen's focus on console releases has lead to a large presence in western markets, including 2005 PS2 release *Legend Of Kay* (below)

Why do think Keen has been so successful at exporting its games outside of the Germany?

Pete Walentin: I think there are two aspects to this. The first is that when we started with Neon studios back in the '90s the goal was to make console games. I think we were the only company in Germany doing this, and when you go console, you *have* to be international. That's the big difference between us and all the other developers which were based in Germany at the time.

Jan Jockel: As a consequence, we worked with Ocean from the UK while other German developers focused on PC games and worked with smaller, local PC publishers. They moved in a different direction.

PW: When we worked with Ocean we had an office in Manchester. We've been in the business now for two decades, and we know the people – I think that's the reason we're so international and make different kinds of games; we have a really good network.

With *Star Trek: Infinite Space*, Keen is moving into the growing browser game market, but do you hope to maintain a focus on consoles, too?

PW: Currently, we're trying to go in both directions because we think the free-to-play browser games market is very interesting. It's young but it's good to be part of it and with Star Trek we have a major IP for what I think is going to be an awesome game. But we want to stay true to our roots and continue developing games for consoles – that's where we come from, and we wouldn't want to lose that.

Do you think the extended lifecycle of the current console generation will give the PC a chance to reclaim some limelight?

PW: I think we've reached a point where it's not so much about how many frames and polys you can render. 3D's here now, so what's next – more colours? No. [Laughs.] More polygons? Not really needed – especially as the production costs rise massively as you try to make more and more realistic environments. I think the most interesting thing for us, right now, is to be online and in the digital distribution channel.

How does Keen utilise its modular multiplatform library, and why is it different to a standard engine?

PW: Most engines are fixed to a few platforms and have a specific job to do, perhaps FPS or whatever. As we're working in so many genres, we built the modular library so that every project could pick the things they need for their game.

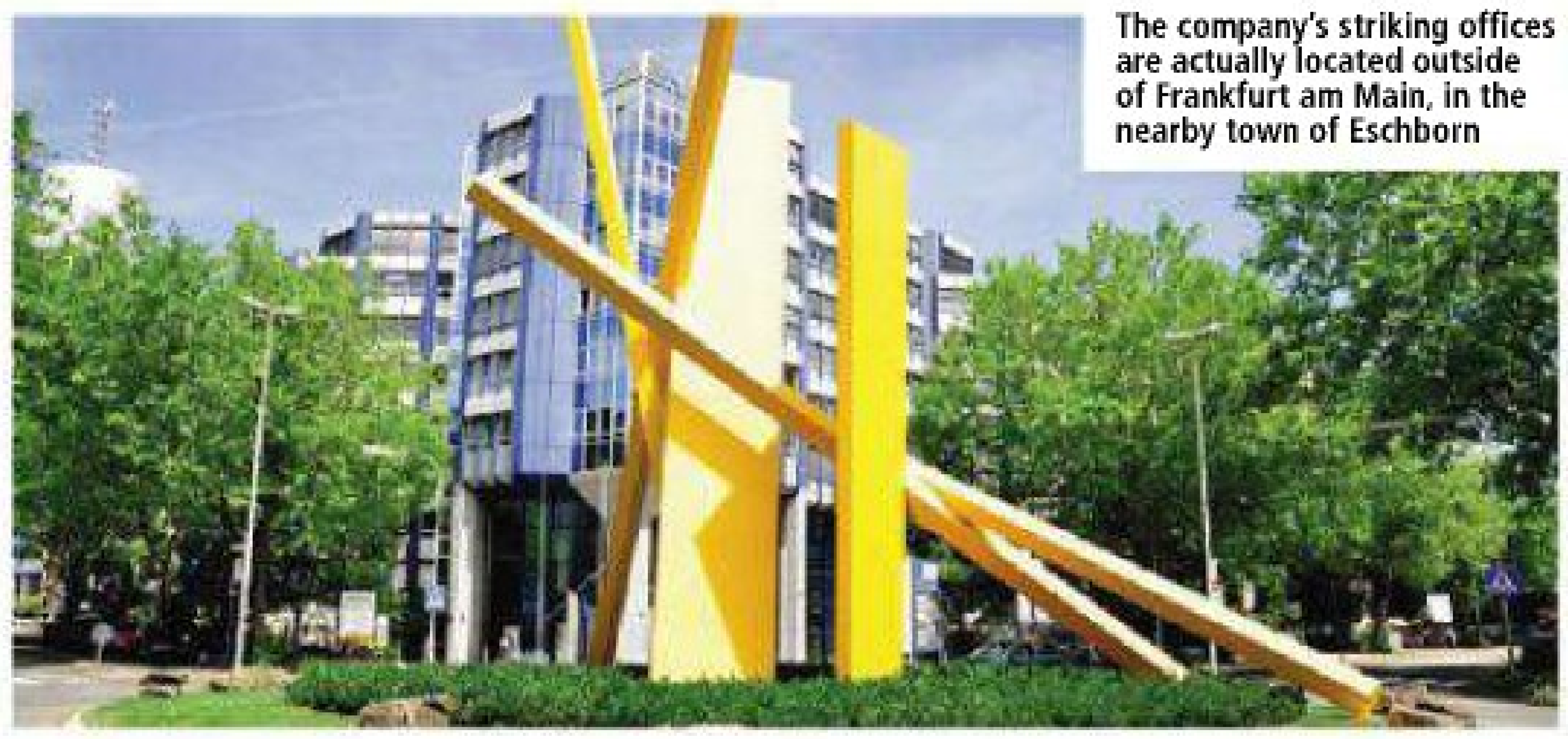
JJ: And, after each project, we see which individual solutions that were created can be added to the library. It keeps growing and means that we have a stronger base to start from each time.

BITCOMPOSER GAMES

An independent publisher that seeks to expose the rest of the world to the best European development

- **NAME:** bitComposer Games
- **LOCATION:** Eschborn
- **FOUNDED:** 2009
- **EMPLOYEES:** 18
- **URL:** www.bit-composer.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Air Conflicts: Secret Wars, STALKER: Call Of Pripyat, The Void, RaceOn, Jagged Alliance: Back In Action, Wildlife Park 3*



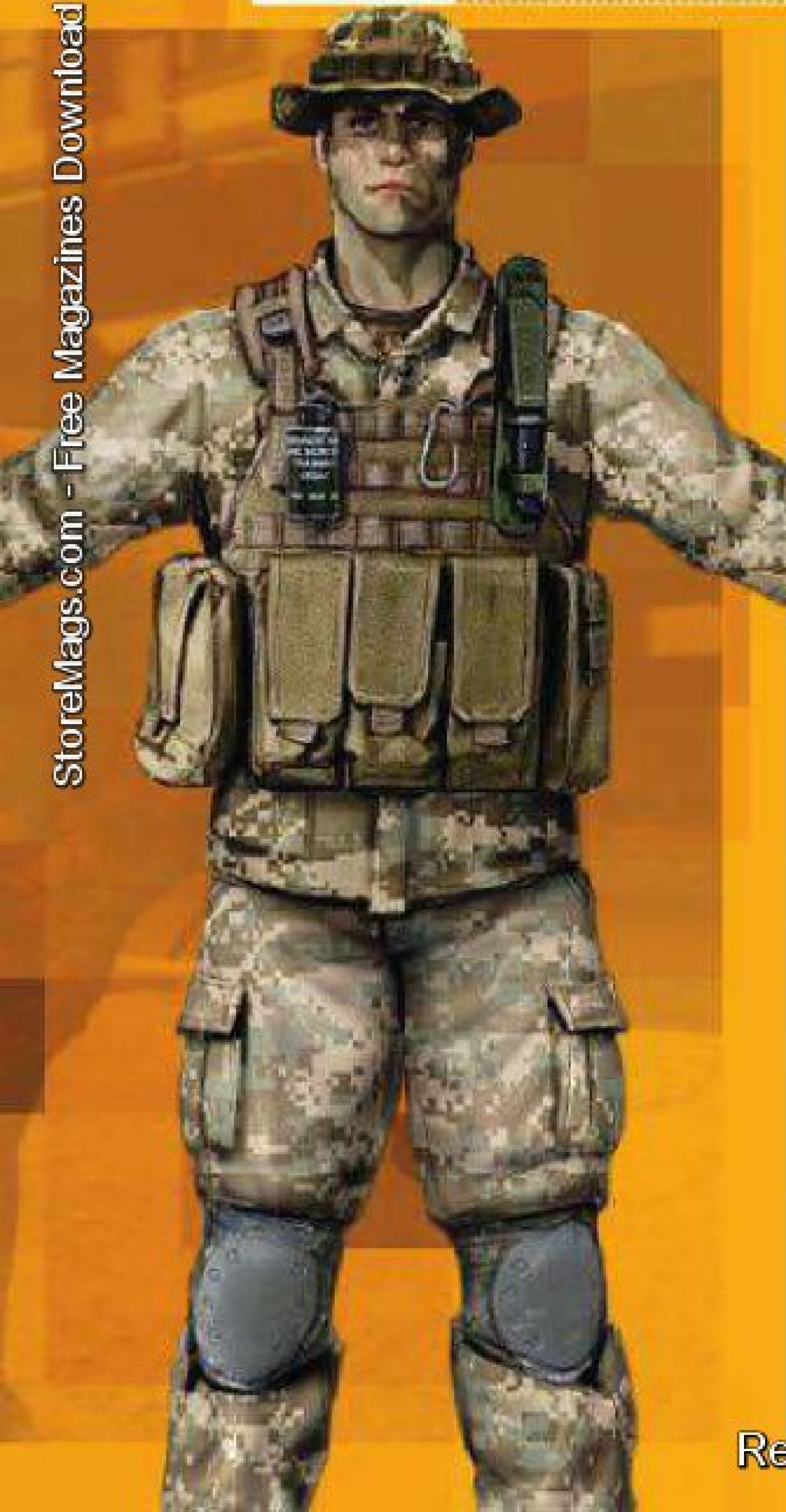




The company's striking offices are actually located outside of Frankfurt am Main, in the nearby town of Eschborn







Interview: Nadine Knobloch

International PR manager

An independent publisher that aims to bring the best European releases to a global audience, bitComposer Games is now expanding its operation to better accommodate digital distribution and produce its own free-to-play titles. We talk with its international PR manager, **Nadine Knobloch**.

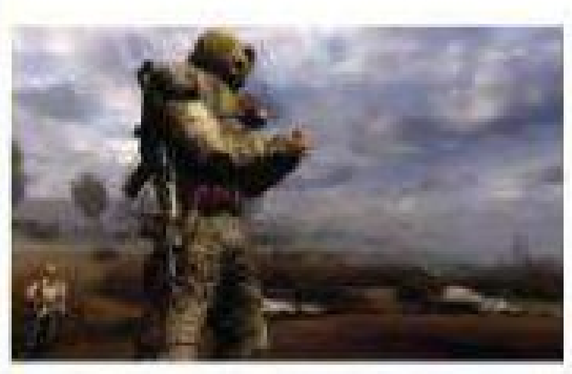
In your opinion, is the PC market being marginalised by consoles?
People have believed the prediction in recent years that the PC market has really been dying for a while now. The fact that it's still going, and also that a considerable number of games are still being sold on PC, proves that consoles and PC can coexist. Sure, there is a shift in the PC products on offer – MMOs, social games and free-to-play products have quite a different relevance in terms of PC gaming today compared to a few years ago. Moreover, digital distribution is gaining considerably in importance and shows that domestic PCs are also used for gambling.

How do you market and distribute your games?
We try to develop the optimum sales and marketing strategy for our games. The products are generally released as boxed versions and are also sold digitally. Steam, for example, is incredibly popular with players from all over the world, and it would be commercial madness not to exploit a sales and distribution channel like that – but that doesn't mean we'll focus on it. We are very active in Europe and the US, and digital distribution plays a large part in these activities. We would be deluding ourselves if we thought we could finance our projects from sales of games in Germany alone.

How is bitComposer structured to straddle the traditional and online markets?
A few weeks ago we created a subsidiary, bitComposer Online GmbH, specifically to enter the online and browser games market and to create a clear distinction with the classic business of bitComposer Games GmbH, particularly as we can achieve more transparency in the different business models.

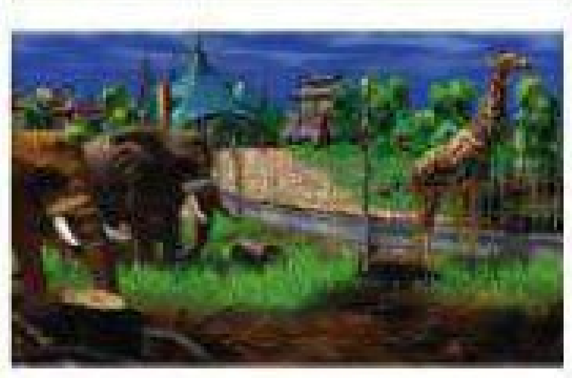
Did you face any issues with the German ratings board when publishing *Air Conflicts: Secret Wars*?
Air Conflicts: Secret Wars is set in the First and Second World Wars and has a historical background which, for us Germans, involves a certain number of policy rules. We are very aware of this and of course adhere to these demands. In Germany, we cannot represent any symbols from the Third Reich – I'd like to emphasise, though, that the historically correct account of the facts has nothing to do with their glorification. A phenomenon that has arisen out of this ruling is that foreign versions of particular games are imported, which demonstrates that people value authenticity without having to therefore assume any political view.

Your mission is to export the best of European developers' output – do you ever face any difficultly translating certain cultures to the UK and US markets?
The markets are different and the cultural characteristics of each country are noticeable. It's a fascinating issue that hasn't caused us any big headaches up to now, as we work very closely with our people on the ground. The responsibility for the marketing strategy lies with the various local partners who are best placed to appraise the situation in their own country. We certainly take the feedback very seriously in the development process, particularly from the US and UK, and this allows us to respond to it in the most effective way.









The company has a diverse catalogue. From top: ***STALKER: Call Of Pripyat, Jagged Alliance: Back In Action, Air Conflicts: Secret Wars*** and ***Wildlife Park 3***

CLARANET GROUP

An internet specialist with a deep understanding of the game industry's needs

claranet
hosting | networks | applications

- **NAME:** Claranet Group
- **LOCATION:** Frankfurt, in addition to operations in Benelux, France, Germany, Spain Portugal and the UK
- **FOUNDED:** 1996
- **EMPLOYEES:** 550
- **URL:** www.claranet.co.uk www.claranet.de/games









Interview: Olaf Fischer

MD

Claranet began life as an ISP, but has since evolved into a 'managed service provider', encompassing offices in six countries and offering developers as much or as little support as they need when it comes to the networking component of their titles. Managing director **Olaf Fischer** talks us through the challenges of integrating directly with the game industry.

How does Claranet support the game development industry?
The key is getting the platform right for running the applications. We can support developers by offering real-world testing on applications prior to launch. This ensures that they have scoped the platform supporting their game correctly, so that it meets their expectations of performance and delivers a great game experience for their customers.

Do many developers approach you early on during projects for advice on how to build the networking portion of their games?
It doesn't happen that often. It happens once they have learned that it makes sense to ask us before they start, and in order to reach that point, it usually takes a bad experience! Many of the smaller customers we have start out by renting a server somewhere with no management at all. So they don't need advice, they just need hardware. And then usually they start growing, and realise that it makes sense to have more management on the infrastructure side of things.

You offer service level agreements to your customers when it comes to running their games. What happens if one is broken?
Each SLA is different, but we tend to have a system which customers really like. So if we meet expectations we get bonus points, and if we fail we get minus points, and this is calculated over a quarter. We make extra money for meeting targets, but have to pay a fine if we didn't – this rarely happens!

Do you think there will be a greater focus on managed service provision and cloud services in the future?
Virtualisation is *the* technology. But I'm not so sure that people will move away from rented or owned servers, because there is a tendency to manage that side of the business themselves – all of these companies are IT sophisticated.

How much of Claranet's development and decision making is dictated by the needs of the game industry?
Claranet's expertise is in providing IT infrastructure solutions – combining hosting, networks and applications – as a service to our customers, irrespective of their industry or sector. The gaming industry is definitely one of our focus sectors, and we have experience within the industry, including key client references. What we offer the industry is, in many ways, no different to what we offer other high-tech industries for whom delivering services online and direct to their customers is business-critical. We offer high-calibre solutions and services, using leading-edge technology, and customised for specific infrastructure needs.

CLIFFHANGER PRODUCTIONS

CLIFFHANGER PRODUCTIONS

Cutting its teeth in production, this studio now has internal development firmly in its sights

- **NAME:** Cliffhanger Productions
- **LOCATION:** Frankfurt
- **FOUNDED:** 2005
- **EMPLOYEES:** 15
- **URL:** www.cliffhanger-productions.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Gothic, Risen, Spellforce 2*







Cliffhanger offers services such as QA management, localisation management, production support and even full production management from its Frankfurt HQ







Interview: Jan Wagner

Founder

Cliffhanger began life as a production company dedicated to solving other developers' problems. That still constitutes a major part of its business, but now the company has turned its hand to making its own games, too. The company's founder, **Jan Wagner**, explains why this is a natural evolution for the company and far from a compromise.

What are Cliffhanger's aims?

We're currently doing two things: one – our original reason for existing – is production, project management and due diligence, all that kind of stuff; and two, we formed our own internal development studio about a year ago. We're currently focusing on online games, mainly browser-based – just like everybody else in Germany! [Laughs.]

Why do you think Germany's developers have embraced browser games to such a degree?

Well, Germany has never gotten around to catching up on the console side, so we were primarily a PC area for much longer than everybody else, which means there is a limit to what you can do in Germany's PC-only market. German players seem to favour RPG, RTS and turn based strategy games. With the exception of RPGs, the PC is the preferred platform for those genres. So for the last ten or 15 years, we've been slowly getting more in-bred, making products that aren't selling internationally, on a platform that isn't really competitive internationally, and we're reaching the point where the minimum quality of these games still has to be so high that production costs can't be covered by domestic revenue alone. When browser games came along, they were the cheap answer for creating RTS and building games. For a while, browser game companies grew at an incredible rate, and if you compare that with the downward spiral traditional studios had, it becomes a no-brainer. It's easy for Germans to access them, and now many of the top browser game companies are based in Germany.

Why did Cliffhanger decide to expand beyond its production remit into development?

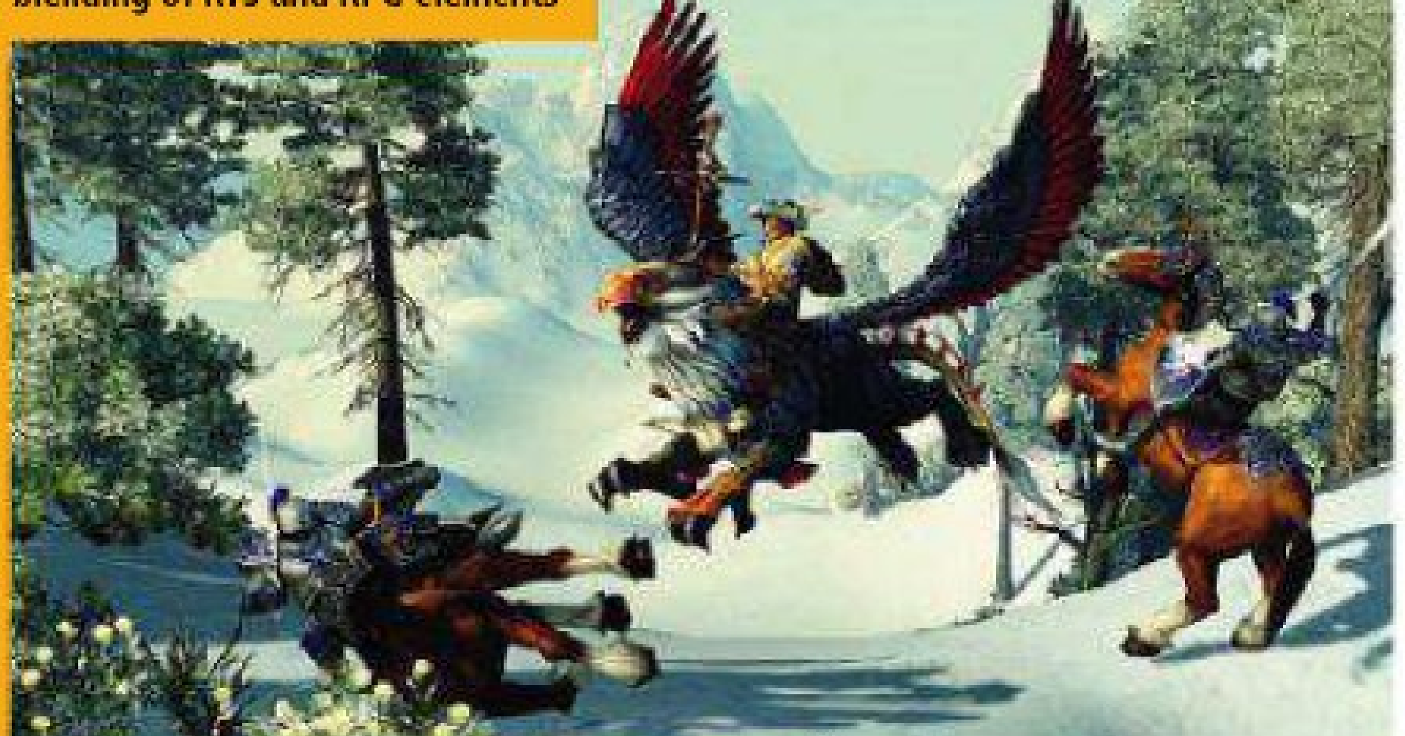
We had a company that wasn't able to grow, as it relies on how much work you're doing and you can only have so many producers doing the same thing. We also realised that without the larger projects in Germany, and even Europe, our expertise wouldn't have been as called for as it had been a decade before that. If you do producing for a long time, you get left out of the rewards for additional success – you're paid up front, and have no access to the revenue, so you don't build any value. I was fed up with having to solve other people's problems and not really gain anything.

Are you concerned that there may be a conflict of interests in making your own games while producing your competitors'?

Yeah, there are potential pitfalls in that, but by and large it isn't much different from working with different developers and publishers before. We're used to working on projects with one studio, and then another studio, and they might even be competitive projects. With fewer genres to choose from here, we did mainly RPGs and RTSes for all the bigger German publishers. Obviously there was a certain transfer of knowledge, but everybody profits from that as we are able to offer suggest more solutions to the studios we work with.



Pirahna Bytes' *Risen* (above) was well received on PC. *Spellforce 2* (below) is a game notable for its blending of RTS and RPG elements

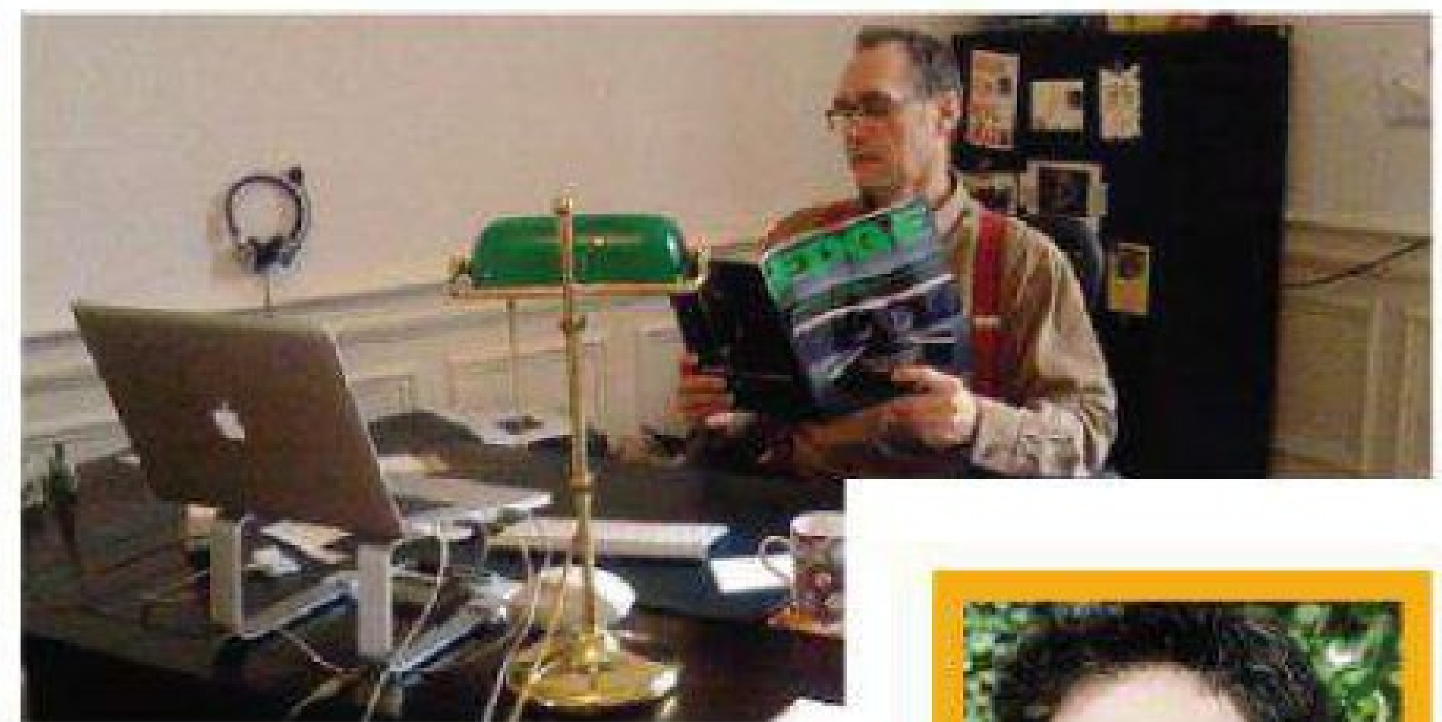


GAMEAREA

One of the game industry's most active associations – and growing rapidly

- **NAME:** gamearea
- **LOCATION:** Frankfurt
- **FOUNDED:** 2009
- **EMPLOYEES:** 12
- **URL:** blog.gamearea-frm.de/

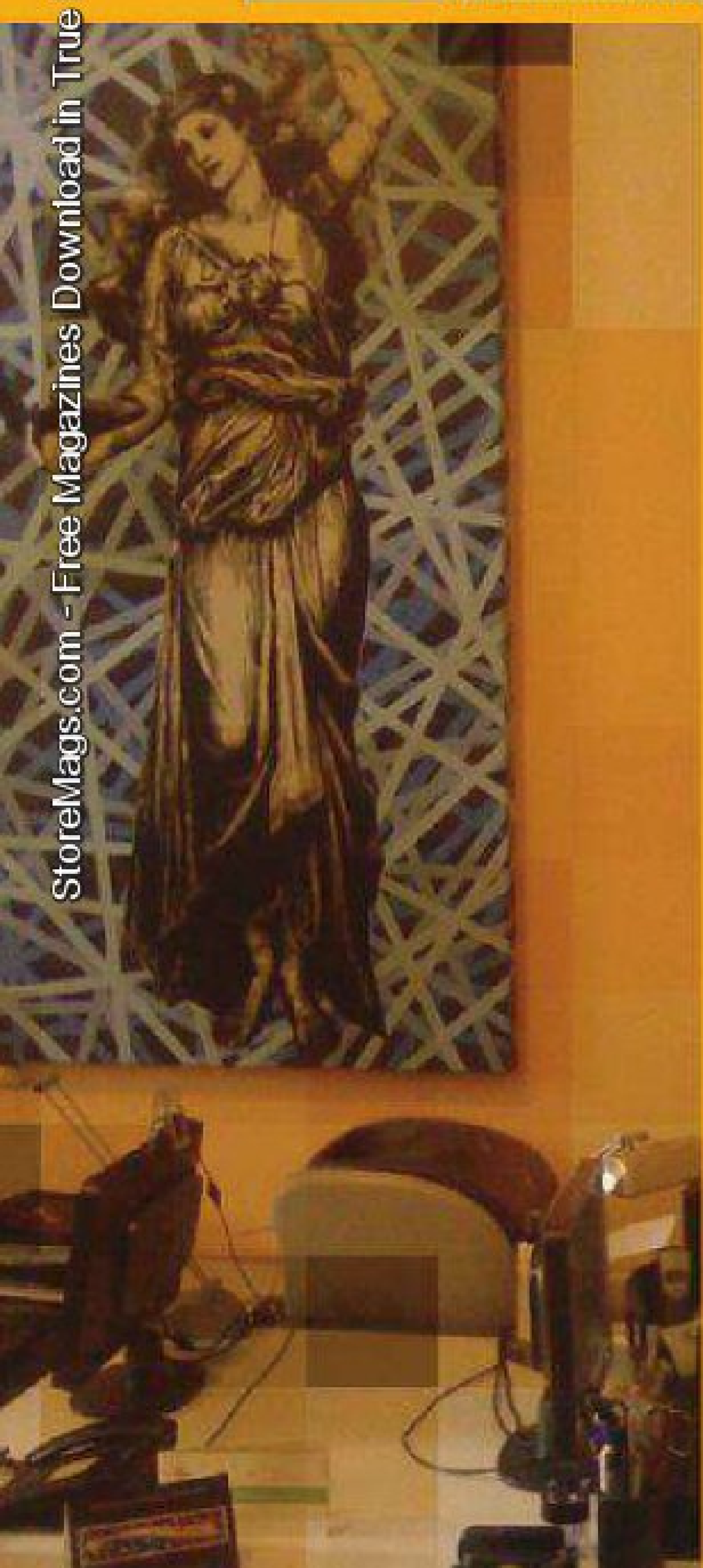




From modest beginnings, gamearea has developed into an influential ambassador for the Rhein Main region, placing its game industry on the map







Interview: Jan Wagner

Co-founder

In addition to his Cliffhanger responsibilities, **Jan Wagner** is also a co-founder of gamearea, the Frankfurt Rhein Main game industry association dedicated to promoting the area on a global scale, and fostering the development community here. Despite its political lobbying, incubator programs and financial aid, however, this is an association that still feels resolutely local.

What are gamearea's origins?

There are other regional initiatives in Germany; Hamburg has one, Berlin and Munich, too – these are natural clusters. We began with a monthly event where we would just meet and have a beer and talk about stuff. Initially, it was an open to everybody. So basically all you had to say was: "I think that I like the game industry, and I support the fact that it exists", and then you could join. [Laughs.] That was a purposefully vague approach because it allowed us to quickly get members throughout the industry, but also from institutions like museums.

But it became quite astounding how many people came, and our IDGA chapter was huge with 300–400 people attending sometimes. We realised that there were around 50 companies here, which for a German cluster is quite large. But we didn't have the reputation for being a game city or the Rhein Main region being a centrepiece of the German industry. But that self-awareness came over time, and with it came gamearea as an organisation that said: "OK, let's bundle this huge amount of people together and see what common interests we have, and help them network and make everybody aware of what's here".

To what extent do you engage with the local government?

From the beginning we tried political lobbying, trying to get tech support, financial incentives and stuff like that from the government in order to help us compete against other regions internationally. If we see any future in the region, we need to be competitive, and that's only partly down to the quality of our teams and what gets produced here. And we need to help new people grow up inside the game industry, which has been increasingly difficult with fewer developers around.

How does gamearea go about ensuring that there are qualified developers coming up through the education system?

We're promoting and supporting the few organisational units that are there, like Darmstadt University or the Games Academy, trying to help them gain a foothold. We send people over to teach and put them in contact with developers. We recently lobbied for Frankfurt to build an incubator for the creative industries, and especially games – so if there are a couple of students who have an idea, they can go there and get a place to work very cheaply. They also get financial and legal help, and we provide a mentor to aid them in the planning of their projects and helping to encourage new ideas too. We wanted to create a grass-roots atmosphere where new developers could rise up. And we are also partnered with, and heavily pushing, the European Innovative Games Award – as if the game industry didn't have enough awards already! [Laughs.]

Why do think that gamearea, and the Frankfurt development community, have been so successful in growing the industry here?

I actually think that because for a long time we've been doing it without any funding, and purely out of a sense that it was necessary to do it. Everybody who participated actively dedicated themselves to it without looking for a reward – everyone believed it. I've been part of industry associations where it almost feels like a parliament, but with gamearea it still feels like we are on a mission. We're a very close-knit community.

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

The default option

Dominance of UI middleware has only whetted Scaleform's appetite. So what's next on the menu?



Brendan Iribe, CEO, Scaleform

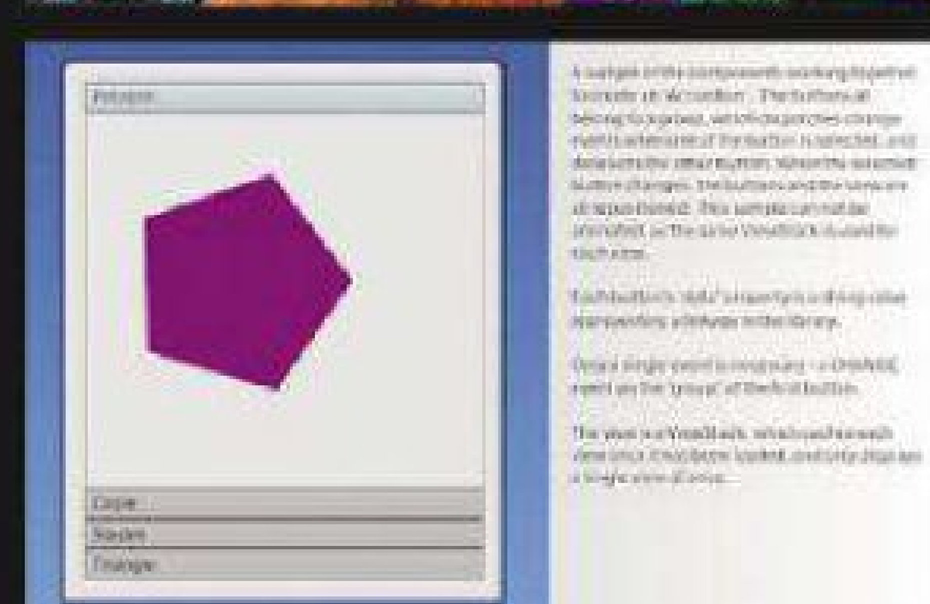
What's the trickiest thing to deal with in the UI space? The answer's in the question. But rather than actual screen space – making sure the health bar doesn't overlap the subtitles, maybe, depriving the hard of hearing of 50 Cent's latest soliloquy – what tends to bother Scaleform is memory. Far and away the most prolific UI solution on the market, it's reached those heights by squeezing vital layers of smooth, responsive 2D into games packed full of 3D worlds.

"Memory is always the biggest challenge, and it'll be the biggest future challenge," explains CEO **Brendan Iribe**. "We've pretty much solved performance on the rendering side – at this point it's only going to be ten to 20 per cent improvement as we continue to peck away at it. But the memory constraints are just as challenging on console as mobile devices. Mobiles today essentially have the same amount of memory, so believe it or not, we actually have less of a memory problem on those where you don't have as rich a 3D experience. On console they want us to use three to five megabytes for the whole UI, whereas on the mobile device, where a lot of the games are 2D to begin with, we can be the entire engine."

For a company founded just seven years ago and whose stock in trade is information display, the move to full-blown game engine provider is

Scaleform GFX4 brings what the company promises to be the fastest 2D graphics engine in the industry





Theoretically, anything 2D is achievable with Scaleform's technology, from the traditional clutter of *Warhammer 40000: Dawn Of War II*'s UI (top) to a slick 2.5D affair like that of *Dead Space*, achieved through simple rotation of the elements. The SDK's own UI (above) shows us how it's done by keeping the process as simple as it sounds

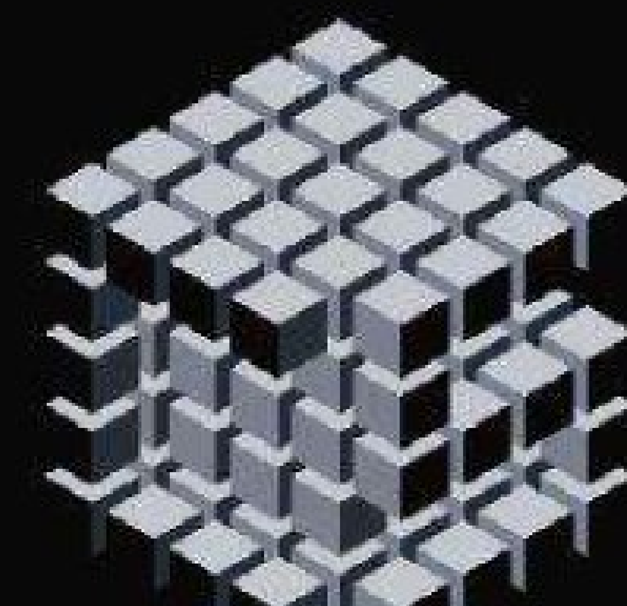
something it needs to communicate. The introduction of Scaleform GFX4, which is currently exiting alpha status, brings with it what the company promises to be the fastest 2D graphics engine in the industry. Lead architect and co-founder Michael Antonov and lead graphics engineer Maxim Shemanarev (also author of the popular Anti-Grain Geometry project) have spent two years integrating industry feedback while achieving double the previous engine's performance, and sometimes even a tenfold increase. "We're very proud of it," says Iribe. "That's the same performance improvement across mobiles, consoles and PCs, so all our customers benefit from it.

"[The game engine] is something that many big-name developers and publishers have been pushing for, so it's nice that we can give it to them and they can start working right away. For the general public it's definitely an unknown, using Scaleform for an entire mobile game. So we demoed it for the first time

www.scaleform.com



Tools like Scaleform CLIK (left) provide a vital and versatile link with Adobe's fast-moving suite of graphics apps. Conformance to the Flash specification is a particular point of pride





In-game texturing (above) is just one crossover space in which Scaleform GFX can work within even the most demanding gameworld





Since the days of *Uno Rush* (above) and *Mercenaries 2* (left), Scaleform's middleware has underpinned a diverse range of games

to just our partners at CES, got a great response, and lined up a number of partners who are going to be showcasing our technology at the MWC [Mobile World Congress] in Barcelona. We're going to be doing a lot more press at the MWC, and the big launch will take place at GDC where we make it available for everyone to download."

Much of Scaleform's success can be attributed to its perspicacity, evident since its inception in 2004. Debuting its software at the outset of a very difficult console hardware transition, it zeroed in on the people most in need: artists. "We've been focusing on a very high conformance to the Flash specification so that artists could rapidly develop in Flash Studio and publish to the console," says Iribe. "Or publish to their game and have the content work right out of the box, without having to make too many sacrifices or modifications.

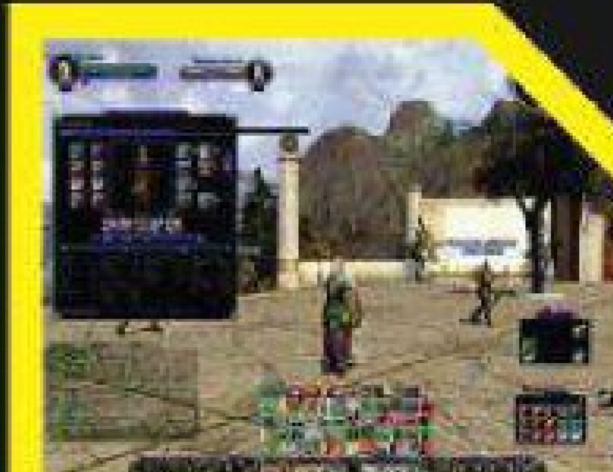
"In the past, other attempts – mostly internal attempts by studios – at making a Flash UI solution fell very short on the conformance. They all typically had a lot of memory and performance problems, but mainly they did not support much of the Flash specification. Scaleform has such a high conformance, close to 100 per cent, that artists can rapidly create content and it works right in their game."

Another example of it knowing which way the wind was blowing: the Asian MMOG market which, with games like *TERA Online* and *Blade & Soul*, is more than threatening to outdo the production values of the usual market leaders. Scaleform got there so quickly, in fact, that its software wasn't even ready at the time.

"It's something we looked at as a boom market two years ago," says Iribe. "I'd say we timed it perfectly. We were a tiny bit late on mobile – about a year earlier and it would have been more fun, being at that Unity position – but we'll catch the wave. In terms of the Asian MMO space we really hit it at the right time, and over 100 MMOs are now using Scaleform in Korea alone. So we really ramped up quickly. We're easily the most successful and widely used piece of middleware in Korea. Games like *TERA* and pretty much any MMO you can think of that's launching uses Scaleform for the UI. They're very early adopters."

They're also, as a result, getting the royal treatment from GFX4.0, which is heavily optimised for MMOG use. "We've even gone as far as to develop a full MMO UI kit which simulates the entire *WOW*, *Trion*-style UI," says Iribe. "So developers can pick it up, see the memory and performance, see how it's implemented and build right off it."

Also arriving later this year is a new standalone rendering engine, the same technology as GFX4.0, designed for developers with their own UI solutions who still want to license Scaleform's tech. "Our view on the world is that by the end of this year – when we have the two products, GFX for Flash and VGX for the rendering – we should be able to cater to every developer out there," says Iribe.



Also on the menu

You'd think that with such an overwhelming support network and bold claims of performance there'd be no one left who *wasn't* using Scaleform, but some have too much invested in their current solutions. *World Of Warcraft*, for instance, sticks to its own LUA and XML solution while other Blizzard games do use Scaleform. "There's no silver bullet," admits Iribe. "There'll still be some cases where developers want to roll their own. If you're on a 3DS handheld where the memory's more restrictive, for the heads-up display it'll probably make more sense to hardcode your own two- or three-bit map-updated HUD, because your HUD is so simple. So what you'll see developers doing on those kinds of devices is that they'll use Scaleform for the frontend menu, but then they'll unload it and do their own HUD."

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

- **COMPANY NAME:** Double Eleven Ltd
- **DATE FOUNDED:** 2009
- **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 18
- **KEY STAFF:** Lee Hutchinson (CEO), Matt Shepcar (technical director)









- **URL:** www.double11.co.uk



- **LOCATION:** Middlesbrough, UK
- **CURRENT PROJECTS:** Several triple-A SCE titles to be announced

ABOUT THE STUDIO:

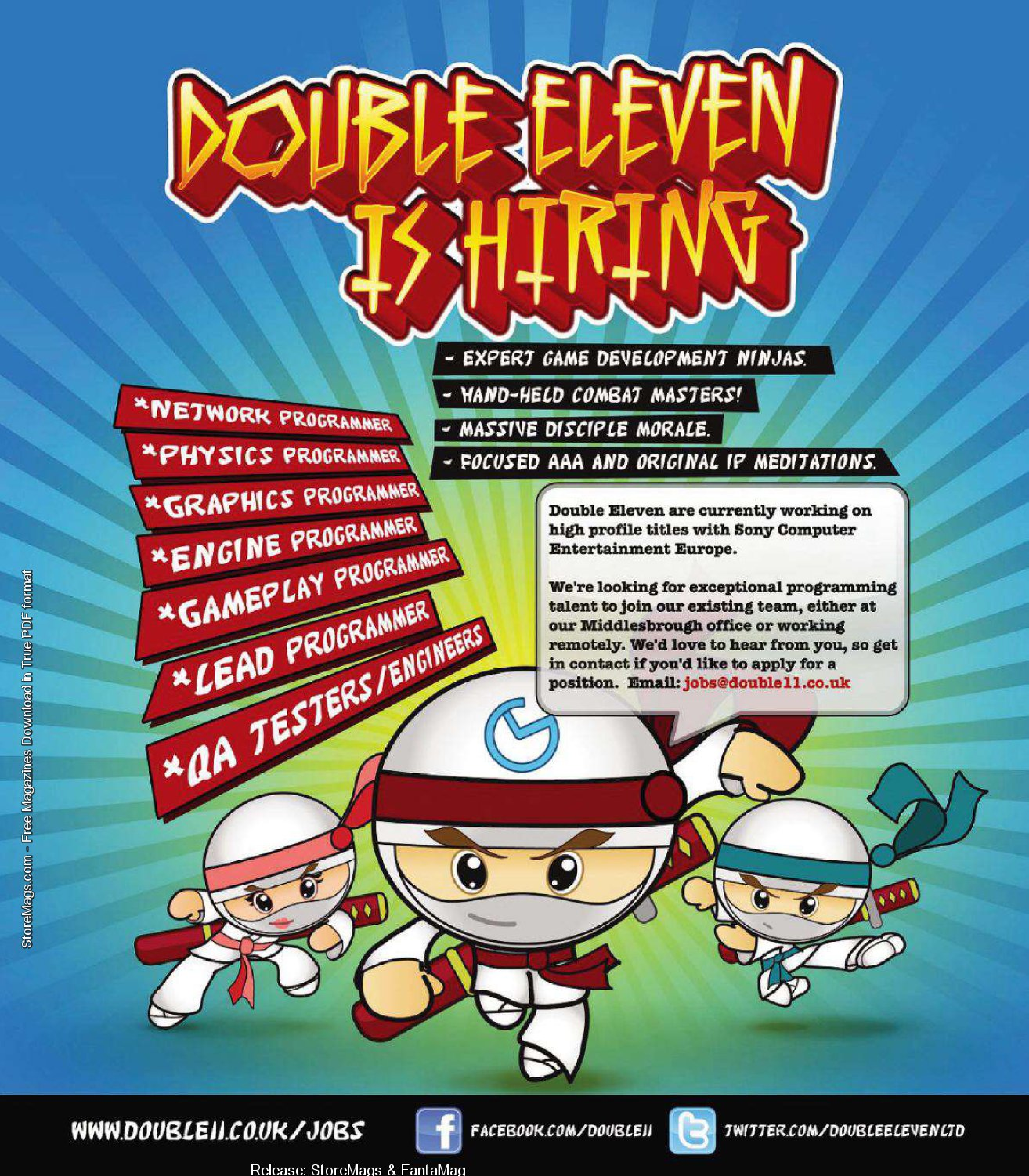
"Double Eleven is a friendly and flexible young games studio based in the heart of Middlesbrough's new 'Digital City'. We were established in December 2009 when the founders, Lee Hutchinson and Matt Shepcar, left Rockstar Leeds to form their own company. Using their experience on *GTA: Chinatown Wars*, amongst other titles, they decided to focus the company on mobile and handheld games. Summoning friends and contacts from within the industry, we quickly grew to an 18-strong team. Only hiring proven and experienced individuals – boasting an average ten years experience and 15 published titles – the Double Eleven team is now a considerable talent pool.

"Our ethos focuses strongly on staff morale; we like to support our employees and their families as much as possible. We accommodate remote working and flexible hours for those with long commutes and busy family lives. We also have 'morale trips' each month and an employee share scheme. We want to ensure our employees are happy as well as productive.

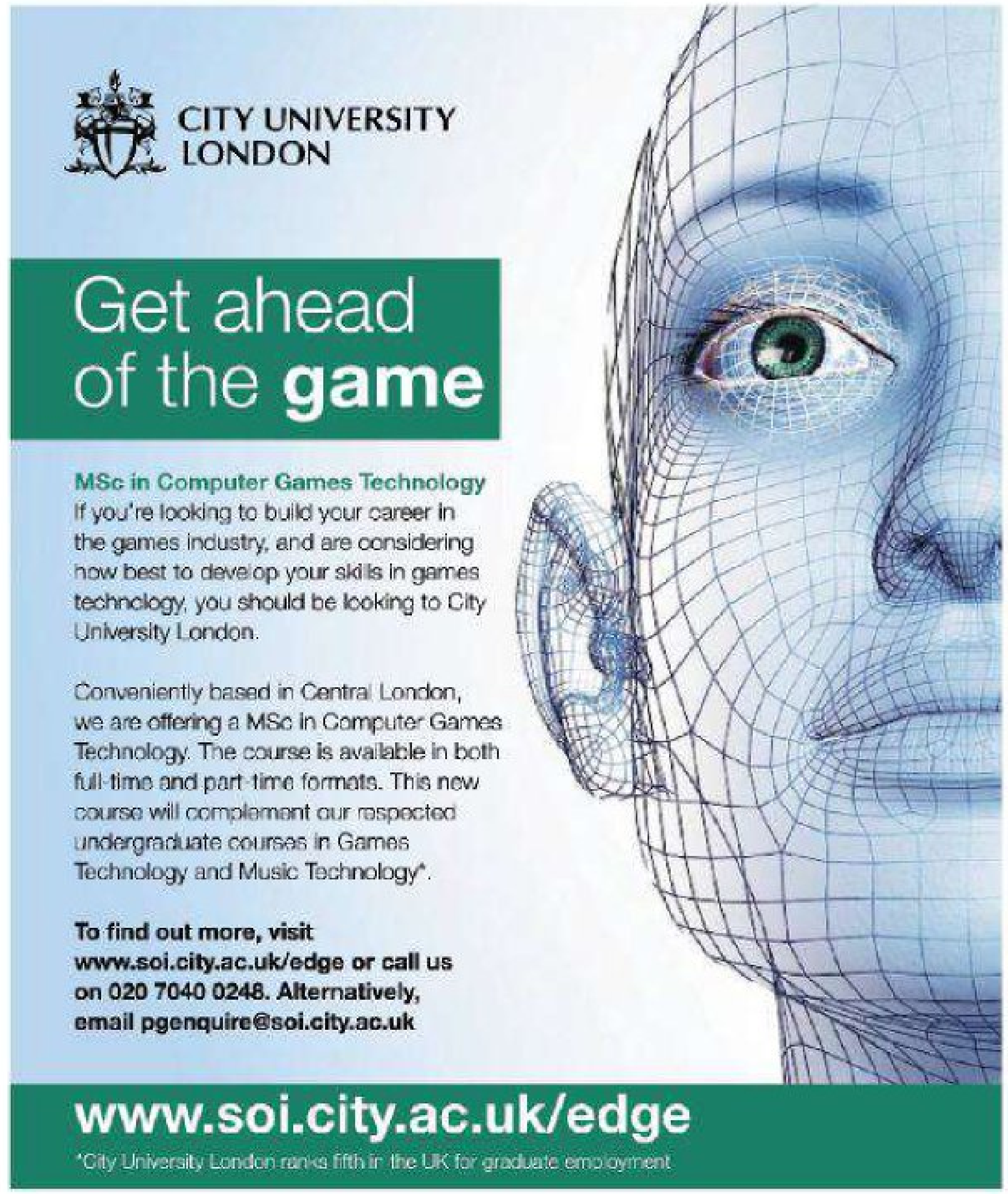
"The other important factor for us at Double Eleven is that we only work on games we want to work on; we believe developers always enjoy a project more if the game is fun and interesting. We are currently working on high-profile titles with Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, and look forward to them being officially announced to the world."



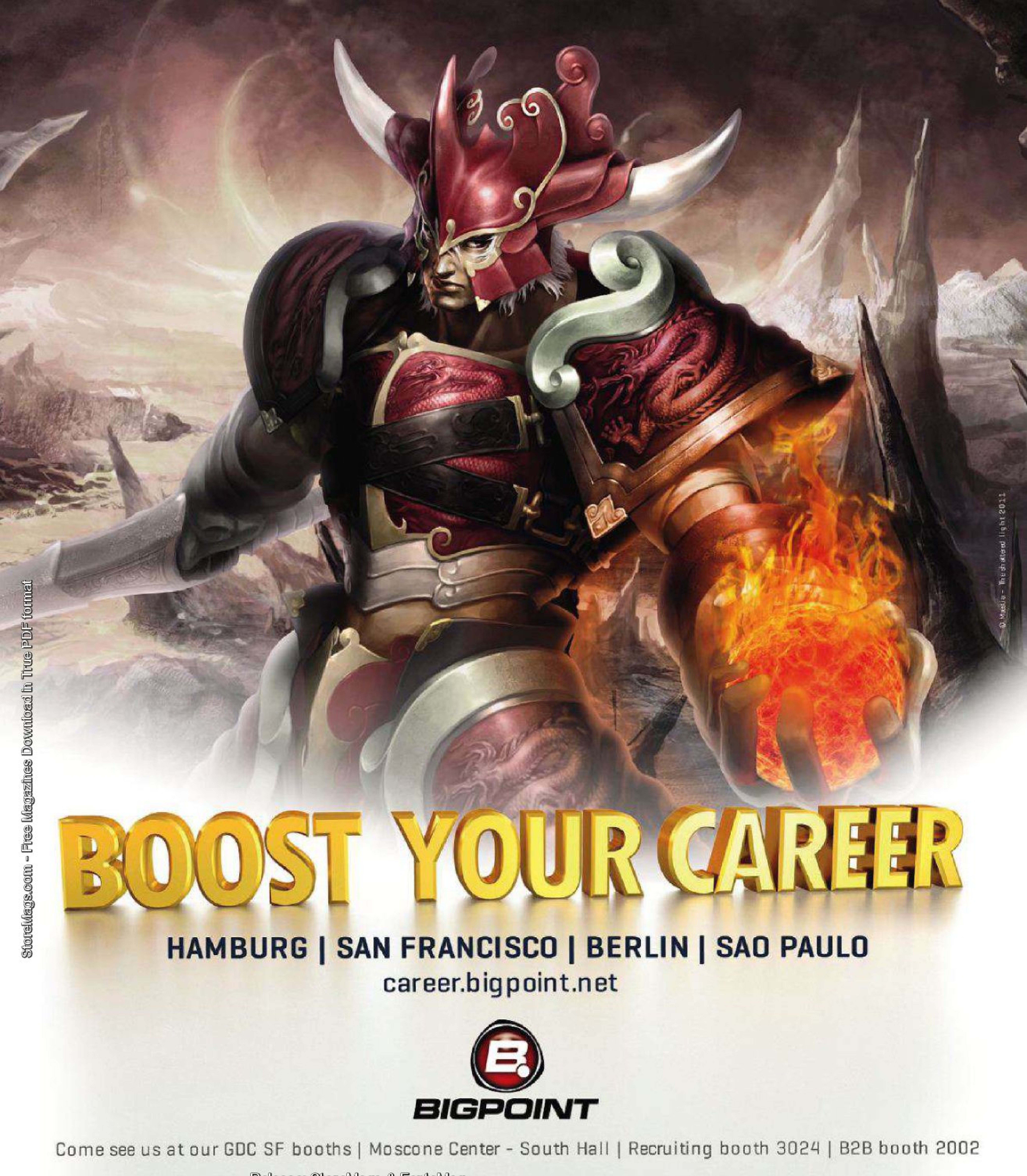
Double Eleven's offices (above) are apparently also home to ninjas (top)


DOUBLE ELEVEN IS HIRING
- EXPERT GAME DEVELOPMENT NINJAS.
- HAND-HELD COMBAT MASTERS!
- MASSIVE DISCIPLE MORALE.
- FOCUSED AAA AND ORIGINAL IP MEDITATIONS.
*NETWORK PROGRAMMER
*PHYSICS PROGRAMMER
*GRAPHICS PROGRAMMER
*ENGINE PROGRAMMER
*GAMEPLAY PROGRAMMER
*LEAD PROGRAMMER
*QA TESTERS/ENGINEERS
Double Eleven are currently working on high profile titles with Sony Computer Entertainment Europe.
We're looking for exceptional programming talent to join our existing team, either at our Middlesbrough office or working remotely. We'd love to hear from you, so get in contact if you'd like to apply for a position. Email: jobs@double11.co.uk
WWW.DOUBLE11.CO.UK/JOBS
FACEBOOK.COM/DOUBLE11
TWITTER.COM/DOUBLEELEVENLTD


sae INSTITUTE
POWERED BY qantm COLLEGE
LONDON'S PREMIER CREATIVE MEDIA COLLEGE
AUDIO FILM MUSIC BUSINESS
3D ANIMATION GAMES
DIGITAL JOURNALISM WEB
DIPLOMAS, DEGREES and SHORT COURSES
Score: 140 Lives: 3
the Mongoose
OPEN DAY
27th February
Register Online Now!
WWW.SAEUK.COM

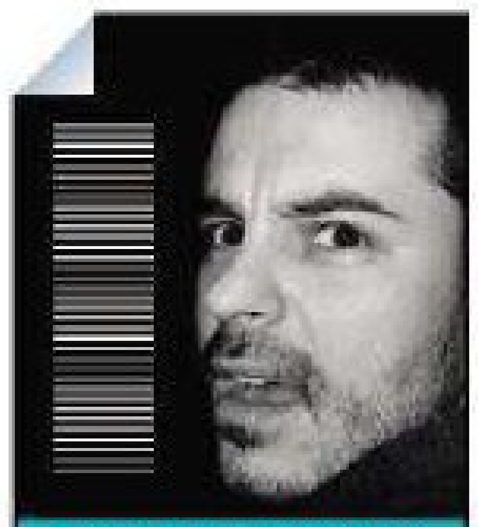

CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON
Get ahead of the game
MSc in Computer Games Technology
If you're looking to build your career in the games industry, and are considering how best to develop your skills in games technology, you should be looking to City University London.
Conveniently based in Central London, we are offering a MSc in Computer Games Technology. The course is available in both full-time and part-time formats. This new course will complement our respected undergraduate courses in Games Technology and Music Technology*.
To find out more, visit www.soi.city.ac.uk/edge or call us on 020 7040 0248. Alternatively, email pgenquire@soi.city.ac.uk
www.soi.city.ac.uk/edge
*City University London ranks fifth in the UK for graduate employment


UNIVERSITY OF Hull
GAMES EDUCATION WITH A REPUTATION
BSc / MEng Computer Science with Game Development
MSc Games Programming
COLIN McRAE DIRT 2
XBOX 360
NBA LIVE 10
SPLIT/SECOND VELOCITY
This is a small selection of the games that Hull graduates have worked on...
Employers say:
"Hull University offers a course that provides its students with highly relevant industry skills and pushes them to excel in an energetic environment. It's great to see students that not only meet the expectations of a highly competitive job market, but raise that bar still further."
Tom Williams: Technical Director - Blackrock Studio
Graduates say:
"After some years working as a programmer in small games companies, I decided to attend the MSc in Games Programming at Hull University. It was probably the best investment of my life. Now I'm a programmer at a AAA studio." Manuele Bonanno: MSc Graduate
www.mscdegrees.com
skillset
The University of Hull's Masters course in Computer Games Programming is the first in England to receive Skillset accreditation.


BOOST YOUR CAREER
HAMBURG | SAN FRANCISCO | BERLIN | SAO PAULO
career.bigpoint.net
BIGPOINT
Come see us at our GDC SF booths | Moscone Center - South Hall | Recruiting booth 3024 | B2B booth 2002


StoreMags.com


Which game was one of the first to bring
3d 'open world' play to the racing genre?
Midtown Madness
Driver
Need for Speed
amiqus
We Know Your World.com



BY CLINT HOCKING

SOMETHING FROM (CLICK) NOTHING The elephants in the room

Part one: What I do like

The game industry is a truly amazing industry to work in. It attracts people who are creative, passionate, brilliant and determined. It is a primary driver of technological invention and innovation. It is in a constant state of flux – surfing on a perpetually cresting wave of change, the industry itself is at its best and most interesting when it is just about to bail, at that perfect instant where all of its balance and energy and momentum and daring are put to the test.

The game companies that comprise the industry – at least those whose inner workings I have had the pleasure of glimpsing – are full of energy and excitement. Games themselves are fascinating magic boxes, and it is no surprise to me that the factories responsible for stuffing that magic in are such wonderful places to be. I am not known for being a 'happy' person, but everything seems to look brighter to me when I'm walking the halls of a game company.

> I am not known for being a 'happy' person, but everything seems to look brighter to me when I'm walking the halls of a game company

And this is to say nothing of developers. Game developers are among the smartest, most creative and toughest sorts of folk I have ever met. They are not only willing and able to tackle almost any challenge put before them, but they often go out of their way to find new challenges to undertake. Game developers hate to back down from a challenge to seek more predictable, better understood solutions – instead, they prefer to invent their way through problems and get to the other side.

The game industry is still a new frontier in many different senses. From a creative perspective, the very basis of what we do remains poorly understood and driven by inquisitive experimentation. Every day we confront new creative challenges as we try to understand how our work speaks to our audience, and which mechanisms make our games meaningful to players.

From an engineering perspective, we continue to hurtle forward at the speed of Moore's Law, wielding algorithms at runtime today that could not have executed in a decade on the machines our industry was founded on. More amazing is that, in many cases, the guys writing today's algorithms got their start on those original machines.

From a business perspective, we are also at the cutting edge. We are trying to figure out how our entirely digital medium fits into an economy that evolved to support physical goods. We need to challenge the establishment, drive change, and invent new ways of distributing product in exchange for money – or even potentially go beyond that and question more fundamental notions of how economies function, and what goods, services, property and exchange even mean.

Even more amazing is that many of the people who work in this industry are well-versed in more than one of these disciplines. Say what you want about game industry executives being cynical bloodsuckers who would cut their own developers' throats for their shareholders, but before you do, stand them up beside a pharmaceutical industry executive, or an energy industry executive. These dirtbags will knowingly poison entire generations, or recklessly overexploit resources while decimating entire regions – and then steal from their shareholders in the process! Those game industry execs that you might be condemning don't look so bad all of a sudden, do they? Now add to that the fact that they not only push forward on some very fundamental problems in business, but they can also run down a flag carrier in capture the flag and then give feedback on the tuning of a shotgun.

Engineers in game development, for the most part, tend to have a pretty good design sense as well. They are the ones who touch the code, and they often have a pretty good sense of what works and what doesn't, and of what will work and what won't. The cliché of the programmer as an awkward, introverted nerd who can't communicate effectively just does not gel with my day-to-day experience of working with them. They are as smart and as design savvy as many designers, and the best of them are multidisciplinary coder-designer geniuses (many of whom are now proving the case for indie development).

And, on top of all of that, for the most part, the game industry is meritocratic. People who do good work, who are good to work with and who make a difference, tend to do well. Yes, sometimes good, smart, talented people draw the short straw, but this is the result of bad luck in a high-risk environment, and not typically the result of unfairness.

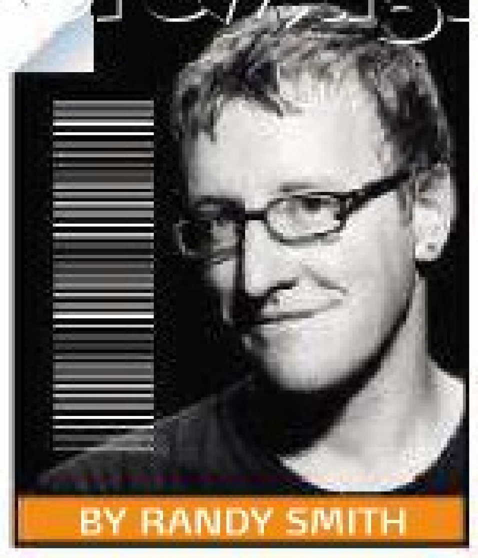
So, for all of these reasons and more, I love working in the game industry. And, now that the hugs and kisses are out of the way, the rest of the columns in this series are going to be about what I don't like.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com



Illustration: marshdavies.com


CRYTEK
EVACUATE
THE POWER TO ACHIEVE YOUR VISION
Visit us at GDC EXPO



BY RANDY SMITH

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

What's next for indie games?

As a newcomer to the indie scene, I walked in on a debate that had been going for some time, namely: what is 'indie'? Is it defined by finances and funding? A certain spirit of creativity? Pixellated graphics and kooky mechanics? Recently, I've been participating in the judging for the Indie Game Festival, the same one that honoured *Spider* with awards in 2010. This batch of games not only helps define what indie means today, it suggests where it might be going.

You could say that once upon a time all games were indie. It was only a few decades ago that the sun rose for the first time on a world in which you could buy and sell a videogame. This was the era of floppy discs sold in ziplock bags and ordered by mail from small ads at the back of niche magazines. The market for interactive entertainment slowly grew as it became less uncommon for computers to be found in homes, until the money changing hands was enough to fight over, and the successful companies were the ones adopting sophisticated marketing and distribution strategies. These companies, with names like SSI, Origin, Maxis, Sierra, retained their independence and authenticity and produced some of the classics of our medium.

Seen from another perspective, I'm an old-school indie, since I started my career at Looking Glass, one of the last indies left standing after a wave of consolidation that was concluding when I joined in 1997. Origin was bought by EA, Sierra by Vivendi, and so on. The biggest fish in this ecosystem were starting to feel akin to the major Hollywood studios in film. This period was the close of one chapter of indie gaming, the death rattle of the cottage industry it had grown out of. The major studios tightened their grip on creative output by virtue of the prohibitive cost of entry involved with getting boxed goods into retail stores. Today's modern chapter probably began when the internet enabled cheap digital distribution, empowering a batch of indie developers whose work feels vibrantly defiant.

I think the current definition of indie stems from this process of rebelling against the relatively narrow band of values pushed by the dominant mainstream. Once a company is publicly traded, it becomes very hard to make any decision that is better for creativity than the health of the business. Indies, then, do what the majors are unwilling to do, stuff that's too personal, arty, unconventional, niche or dangerous. IGF contenders exemplifying this include *Desktop Dungeons* with its unexpectedly effective '*Minesweeper* meets *Rogue*' concept, or *Marvin's Mittens*, which looks like a game and quacks like a game but by rejecting dogmas about goals and score is instead an experiential art piece which beautifully captures nostalgic childhood memories of playing in the snow. Similarly, we have titles like *Jamestown*, *Nidhogg* and *Super Crate Box* which are based around conventional platforming and shooting gameplay but as products are too focused and small to be worth the time of the major studios. As a side effect, these games express more refreshing style and personality than the safety-minded mainstream would attempt.

> "Indies do what the majors are unwilling to do, stuff that's too personal, arty, unconventional, niche or dangerous"

If that's where indie has been, other IGF titles point to where it might be going. *Skulls Of The Shogun* is *Advance Wars*-style tactics with fewer clicks and more character. *Recettear* is a tycoon game about managing an adventurer's shop. *Amnesia* walks us through a chilling horror story set in a firstperson, *Thief*-like mansion. The commonality is that these are big, polished productions, far beyond indie's current median. In a comparison similar to indie film versus Hollywood, these games are only a few creative decisions away from mainstream fare. This can be attributed partially to the high cost of development: once you've invested that much you'd really like to reach a wide audience, not explore your most avant and difficult excesses. As experienced developers abandon the mainstream, these games may turn out to be the first in a new category of more conventional and elaborate indies.

The elephant in the room has been *Minecraft*, the collaborative construction game inspired by *Dwarf Fortress*. It's hard to judge objectively a game that has set new precedents among indie hits, having generated enormous fervour and somewhere in the neighbourhood of ten million dollars in revenue. In some ways, *Minecraft* demonstrates what indie does best by focusing boldly on a concept that is unique to the medium but one mainstream developers wouldn't embrace. I wonder if the money involved is enough to put it on the radar of the majors. Is EA working on a *Minecraft* clone with less freedom and more window dressing? Will Valve slurp it up like it did *Portal*? And what does that tell us about a future in which indies reach mega-hit status with more regularity? Will they retain their independence? My hope is for an expansive indie scene, covering the full range from tiny, personal releases to huge, polished works, which can give the mainstream a taste of freedom and a run for their money.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch

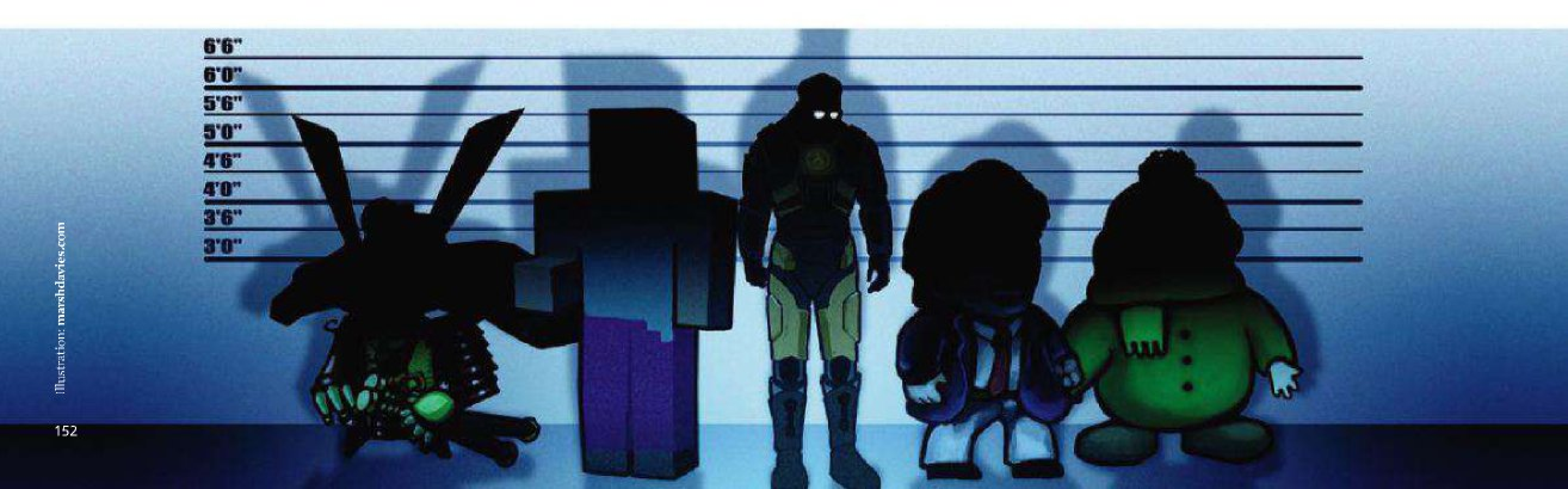
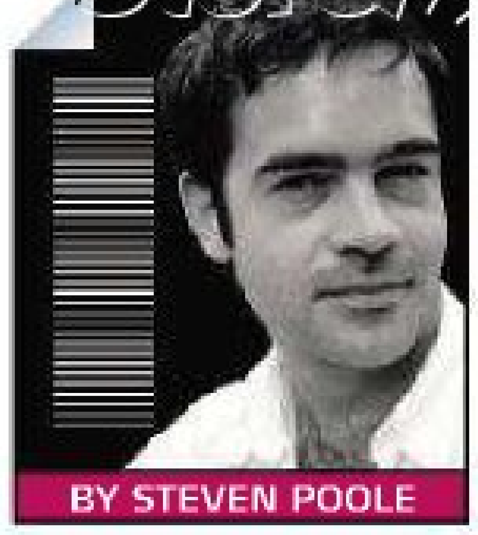


Illustration: marshdavies.com


havok™
SERIOUS TECH AT PLAY
WORLD CLASS SUPPORT | NOW AVAILABLE ON SMARTPHONES | PROGRAMS FOR ALL BUDGETS
Email us at blade@havok.com



BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

Playing with phones

A troubling trend for Nintendo and Sony seems to be under way, at least according to the market-research firm Interpret. It recently announced that the proportion of the 'phone/DS/PSP gaming market' playing games on their phones rose by more than 50 per cent over the last year, while the proportion of those playing on DS or PSP fell by 13 per cent.

Perhaps this, if true, simply reflects the logic that the best mobile gaming machine is (like the best camera) the one you always have with you. But apart from the (somewhat mystifyingly huge) success of apps such as *Angry Birds*, a deeper reason for a possible general migration from handheld consoles to phones suggests itself: might it be that the modern smartphone is itself already a kind of game, even before you install any games on it?

Telephony, after all, is really a shoehorned-in legacy feature of smartphones, which, like videogames, operate through a smorgasbord of visual metaphors and cybernetic syntax that seems natural and comprehensible to us only because we have experienced its gradual evolution. Surely a great number of young adults in this day and age, for example, have never used a spiral-bound agenda book, and yet that is the standard icon for a calendar app. The icon for dialling on my phone is a massive, bulbous ear-and-mouthpiece from the era of rotary-dial Bakelite telephones. Email is signified by an envelope, which is particularly odd given that one of the major differences between snailmail and email is precisely that the latter lacks anything that is analogous to an envelope. (Email is more like a postcard, with a similar level of privacy.) Perhaps most intriguingly, the icon for 'save' in many menus is still a floppy disk, which has been obsolete for so long that what this image now means is, exclusively, 'save': it is only contingently and unimportantly a representation of a once-common physical object.

Then there is the whole gestural vocabulary of the touchscreen interface: tapping, pinching-to-zoom, inertial scrolling, or swiping horizontally between virtual 'homepages' (a curious hangover, this term, from the '90s Web, now leached of its optimistic implication of personalised content and indicating only a user's chosen arrangement of icons and widgets supplied by others). Some of these movements seem oddly reminiscent of the manipulation of cellulose-coated playing cards, already an old and ingrained metaphor in computing (Hypercard and 'stacks'), which makes the playing of Solitaire on a touchscreen phone a curiously Russian-doll experience of cards-within-cards.

> "Might it be that the modern smartphone is itself already a kind of game, even before you install any games on it?"

Meanwhile, the now-common 'slider' control on touchscreens (slide to answer or unlock) seems weirdly to half-imitate a mechanical apparatus that never really existed: because what would be the point of a real-life slider with only two states, on or off? In the physical world, a slider controls continuous values (eg, a volume fader); in the touchscreen world, it is a strangely nonsensical metaphor introduced only to solve the problem of the phone accidentally doing something in your pocket or handbag.

The modern smartphone, then, has its own complex and rather arbitrary grammar, which must be learned before you can do anything with it, or feel comfortable using different devices – just as the modern console FPS has an evolved cybernetic grammar that enables the initiate to pick up a new one easily (sticks and triggers usually do much the same thing), but proves forbidding to the novice.

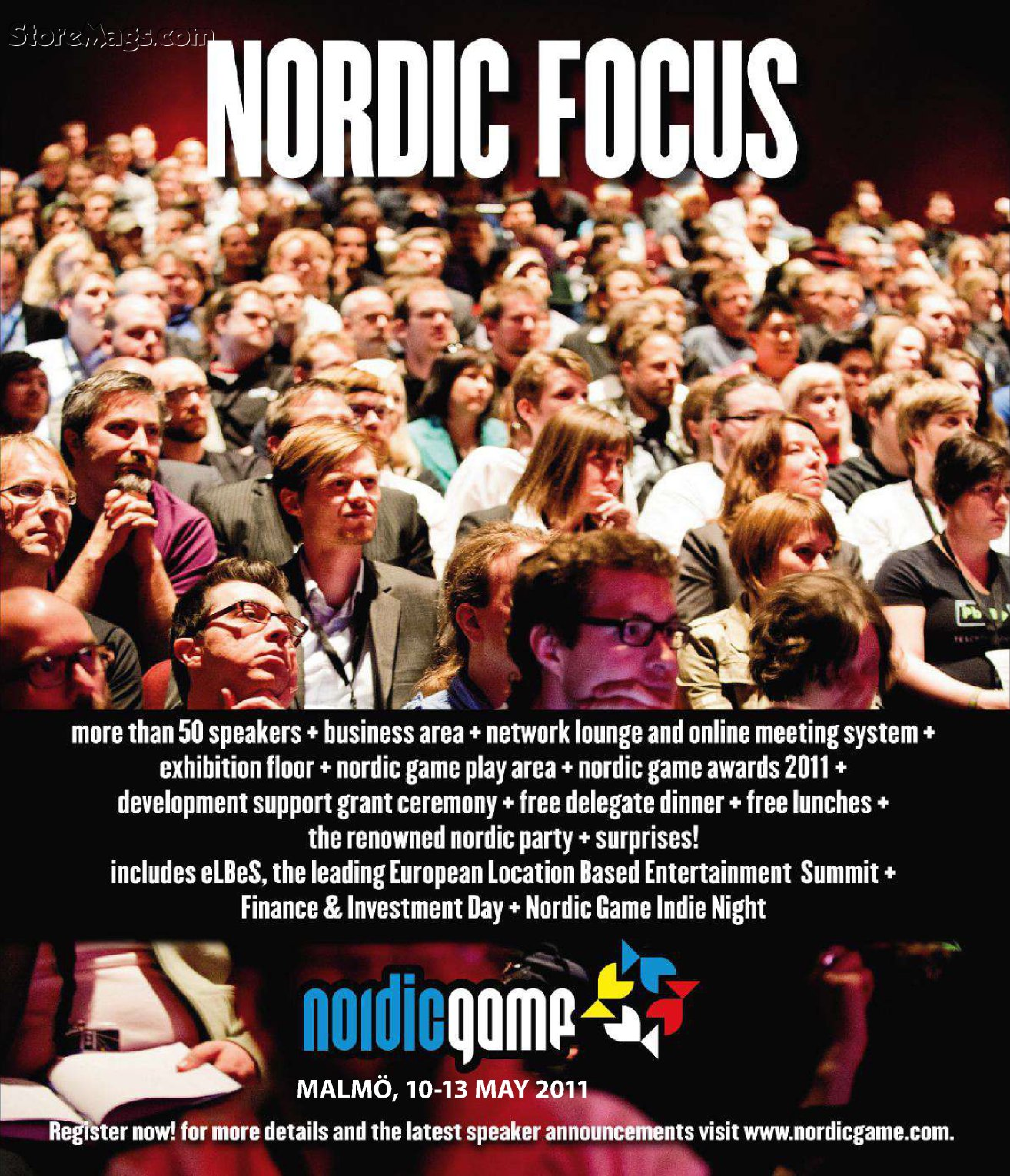
And it is already a kind of pleasure to exercise one's mastery of this grammar, even to no explicitly conceived final purpose. Hence the people you sometimes see idly swiping through pages of apps or scrolling up and down in lists, tapping here and there but apparently not trying to do anything in particular, just indulging in the cybernetic pleasure of the interface, in a kind of freeform zoned-out play. The fact that there is no win-state to this kind of idle interaction does not prevent it from being a game, just as *Noby Noby Boy* is still a game. (Once you start down the path of rooting and installing 'unapproved' utilities, meanwhile, you are deeper in explicitly gamelike territory thanks to an extra risk-reward function: will you succeed in making your hoped-for improvements, or just brick the phone?)

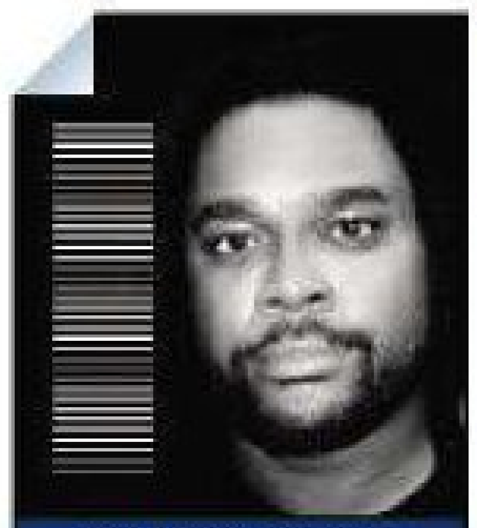
It ought to be no surprise, then, if dedicated portable gaming machines are losing ground to phones – not because the games on phones are better than those on a DS or PSP (they aren't, by a long chalk), but simply because the modern Android or iOS phone is already a game, one that costs much less upfront, and one which you will have bought anyway because, well, you need a phone. Actual videogames need to step up to rival the hypnotic experience of merely using a smartphone. In a way, for game designers, the competition is now the operating system itself.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net



Illustration: marshdavies.com


NORDIC FOCUS
more than 50 speakers + business area + network lounge and online meeting system +
exhibition floor + nordic game play area + nordic game awards 2011 +
development support grant ceremony + free delegate dinner + free lunches +
the renowned nordic party + surprises!
includes eLBeS, the leading European Location Based Entertainment Summit +
Finance & Investment Day + Nordic Game Indie Night
nordicgame
MALMÖ, 10-13 MAY 2011
Register now! for more details and the latest speaker announcements visit www.nordicgame.com.



BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

Ch-ch-ch-changes

One of the most thought-provoking conversations I've ever had was with an executive at Marvel Comics. I was writing an article about Marvel's ongoing comeback, which was most visible at the box office. But the executive was recounting how the turnaround started happening earlier, as the company began to accept the transition of superhero comic books in the US away from newsstands and towards bookstores. As the exec explained, when comic books were largely sold in drugstores and on newsstands, writers and artists approached their stories with an eye to ensuring their customers return in 30 days: a splash page to hook them and a cliffhanger to bring them back. Any successful comic book's narrative would just go on and on and on.

Some time after the comic boom in the late '80s and bust in the early '90s, it became clear that there was a growing appetite among both avid and occasional comic book readers for collected volumes of various issues. The challenge was that the absence of standard lengths for story arcs made it difficult to figure out the appropriate place to start and end a collection. So DC and Marvel began encouraging their writers to pen four- and six-issue story arcs for their ongoing superhero books, with almost no arcs to exceed 12 issues. The result? Increased sales of trade paperbacks and hardcover collections, and story structure that had more in common with episodic television than with daytime soap operas or telenovelas.

> "Audience fragmentation makes it challenging for entrenched competitors to figure out which horses to bet on"

That discussion got me thinking about a similar evolution in US TV. In other parts of the world, short seasons of six, eight or 13 episodes are common, but here, the goal for decades for television producers was to get their shows into syndication, where the 'real money' would be made. The target number was to produce at least 100 episodes, which meant upwards of 20 shows per season. And because the producers could not guarantee that the syndicator would air the shows in the order in which they were originally aired, TV writers generally had to stay away from multi-episode arcs. The ultimate example of this intersection of creativity and distribution requirements was Law & Order, where the criminals were caught and convicted in a single hour, with little of the recurring characters' personal lives to get in the way.

Contrast that with HBO, a paid subscription channel. From the perspective of HBO's executives, they just needed to give their customers one excellent reason to subscribe. Without the restrictions of broadcast TV or basic cable, they could ratchet up the nudity, violence and profanity. In the absence of syndication, its writers were free to develop shows with complex characters and season-long arcs. The rise of DVD box sets gave HBO an additional revenue stream that didn't require it to compromise its creative freedom.

As the success of alternative business models gives rise to new creative approaches, it's often accompanied by audience fragmentation. Established companies like to bemoan audience fragmentation because it often means that their own market is eroding in the process. But as consumers, this also makes it more likely that our specific, niche tastes can be satisfied in an era of 500 cable channels – to say nothing of millions of online videos – than in the age of the big three US networks. Compare this to the ongoing criticism of theatrical distribution in the US, where the box office split among studios and exhibitors (as much as 90 per cent goes to the studios in the first week, but that percentage steadily decreases over time) encourages studios to devote the bulk of their financing to making the kinds of movies that will pack audiences in on opening weekends before turning up on DVD in three to six months. In other words, the types of films teenagers will rush to see.

Videogames are, at present, undergoing a similarly dramatic transformation. The spread of online distribution to both at-home and mobile environments makes it possible to play games anywhere. Moore's Law is putting increasingly powerful chips in televisions, set-top boxes, Blu-ray players and mobile phones. An entirely new class of devices, tablets, is on the rise. Communal gaming is returning, thanks to the plastic instruments of *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*, the Wii Remote, and Kinect and Move. And there is increased acceptance in western markets of alternative business models like ad-supported games and microtransactions.

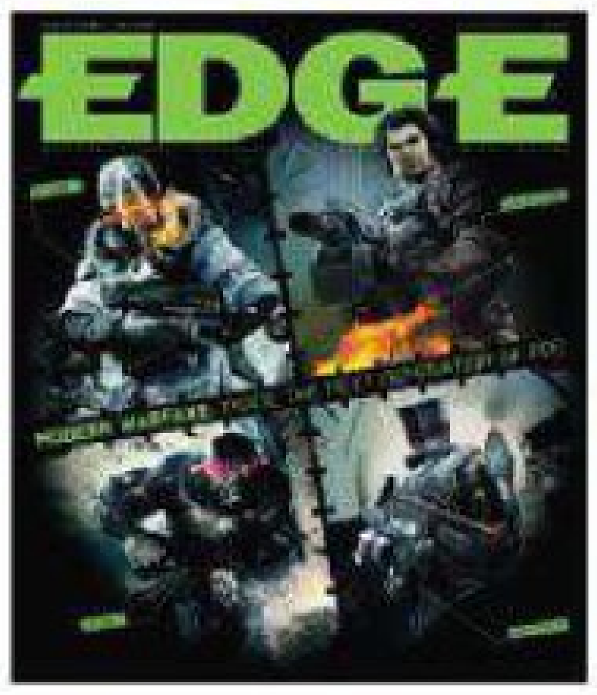
This fragmentation makes it challenging for entrenched competitors to figure out which horses to bet on, which in turn accounts for some of the layoffs and closures taking place across the industry. But it also creates new opportunities for developers and publishers who can focus their nascent ventures on the new audiences that are sprouting left and right. I can't say for certain what the other side of this transformation will look like. But I do know that one day, we'll look back at this moment in time and be shocked that we were once limited to a handful of platforms and genres.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com



Illustration: marshdavies.com

Inbox



Issue 224

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum
forums.next-gen.biz

Topic: Gaming ethos in the workplace
Could the adoption of gaming ethos in your workplace make your job more productive and possibly even more fun?
wonderbanana

Gaming has always affected my 'real' life insomuch as I always want to win. Also, my time playing adventure games has given me the attitude that there is always a solution to a real-world problem (unfortunately this has the effect of stopping me from giving up on a problem that can't be solved and it bugs the hell out of me).
Lurch666

When I worked in retail, we did Salesman Bingo. A grid of things to upsell or add on to an existing sale. Worked quite well. Retail's probably the easiest thing to gamify though, as it's already a contest: most money wins.
"Gamify." Urg, what have I become?
FentonBailey

In response to **E**222's Industry Focus, and more specifically Jonathan Carey's letter (**E**222) and the dream of foregoing physical media to get your games delivered, please do not count me in on the new world order, as in doing so you will surrender the freedom of choice and price. Digital distribution is currently a very clever way of ironing out any competition and fixing the price of software for longer. It's a far cry from the open market of MP3 downloads and film distribution that is currently offered.

For example, why pay £20 for a Xbox On Demand Classic title when you can get the same product on disc for about £8 brand new? *Gran Turismo 5: Prologue* was £25 on PSN on release, yet only £18 on disc. For download-only gaming, once you have a large collection of downloaded games on your hard disk, you then have to start thinking about backing them up, and this will also involve buying another HDD to back it up to. Why bother when the backup of the game *is* your physical disc purchase, just sitting there on the shelf?

I am a fan of copying discs and games to HDD and think it's a great idea and a performance boost, but the thought of doing away with physical media altogether means that any initial price savings you made buying bigger hard drives for your consoles will erode away very quickly when you are paying full RRP on all software.

Maybe in the future if online shops like Amazon and Play are able to also sell you downloadable copies of the latest *Call Of Duty* then things might have a different outlook, but with Apple leading the way with their App Store as an example (only apps and games are available via iTunes, nowhere else), I cannot see this happening. So before you start to loathe your trusty DVD or Blu-ray disc, just remember that it got to you cheaply, it's yours to do with what you want, and because you copied it to hard disk, it is also your backup.
Neil McAlister

As the transition to a world of pipe-delivered content continues, it's easy to get caught up in the details and forget good old-fashioned issues. Be sure to back up games purchased on your new DSi XL. (Or... perhaps not.)



Letter of the month wins a DSi XL

I have not played Hot Pursuit. Nor do I have any desire to. Despite this, I have received more than a handful of messages in my inbox extolling its virtues

I am writing to you to pick up on your points in **E**222 about *NFS: Hot Pursuit*'s Autolog feature. In the review you describe Autolog as 'an innovation designed to be shamelessly cloned by the competition', and I have to say that this statement worries me immensely. You see, I have not played *Hot Pursuit*. Nor do I have any desire to, not being a fan of the racing genre in general. Despite this, I have received more than a handful of messages in my inbox extolling the virtues of *NFS: Hot Pursuit* and inviting me to come and join in all the fun.

Are these messages coming from a rather enthusiastic friend, desperate for more competition? No, they are automatically generated messages produced by Autolog and sent out to all the people in the player of *Hot Pursuit*'s friend list. Whether or not this player has any choice over whether or not to bombard their friends with these messages I do not know (as I said before, I have not played the game), all I know is that I have no choice other than to receive them. Now, correct me if I am wrong, but I consider these messages to be little more than spam or junk mail. And, at the time of writing, Xbox 360s have no form of in-built message filtering system, so I have no way of blocking the offending messages once and for all.

The reason this 'innovative' feature is worrying me is that if it is indeed cloned by the competition, it won't be long before I receive a message every time each person on my friends list buys a new game. From that point it isn't hard to imagine a time when I receive a message each time someone I know unlocks a new Achievement, or sets a new high score, or beats a particularly dastardly boss, and so forth. Is it just me, or is this situation beginning to sound very much like a certain social networking site which has recently had to have a major overhaul due to the number of games constantly encouraging users to share even the tiniest of achievements with everyone they know? With any luck Microsoft will see the dangerous route that *NFS* is heading down, and stop it before I

drown in a sea of messages encouraging me to purchase games that I don't want to play, but until that point I will be removing anyone from my friends list who plays games featuring Autolog.
Gillian Patterson

Autologophobia has taken hold in the **Edge** office too, once we realised just what it was capable of. If the system's outreaching excesses haven't been curtailed by the time you read this, we'll be surprised if it doesn't happen sooner rather than later.

From first setting eyes on Melee Island, jealously helping my school mate work his way around its (il)logic, I have had a fond relationship with all things point-and-clicky. Whilst it has as a form really only incrementally developed from its heyday in the late '80s/early '90s, I have found much to enjoy with a lot of Telltale's output over the last few years, particularly their brand of humour and art style. However, it was only when playing *Heavy Rain* that I became aware of a lot of what was missing from my beloved genre. Despite its flaws, I enjoyed the moral dilemmas and tension (albeit forced) that the writers managed to squeeze out of certain sections. One sequence in particular, owing much to Saw and its ilk, where you had to determine how you would cut your finger off successfully (!) was particularly immersive. It can be argued that *Heavy Rain*, and its predecessor *Fahrenheit*, are in many ways a progression of the point-and-click adventure game, however I would love to see the darker tone of these games transposed to the traditional point-and-click. I'm not a huge fan of the so-called 'torture porn' genre that's now dominating horror films, but its type of twisted logic is perfectly suited to the nature of puzzles in a point-and-click.

Furthermore, with an eye to modern TV drama, and shows such as The Wire and Deadwood, I would love to see a level of moral ambiguity and social conscience that a lot of independent game developers have carefully been exploring, along with the major developers, mainly in RPGs. I think the stringent mechanics of the point-and-click could give real depth to this kind of tone, where other games such as *Fallout 3* and *Mass Effect*, whilst great games, have often been let down by their ambitious mechanics. For example, the atmosphere-breaking bugs of *Fallout 3* and the sheer scope of *Mass Effect*'s universe can limit the weight of your character's consequences; it's hard to care for a planet or race's outcome when you've had so little interaction with them. *Mass Effect 2* largely overcame these criticisms, but I feel a really stripped-down design like that of the point-and-click could be really complementary in creating an immersive world. The humour dominating the genre definitely has its place, but wouldn't it be great to see a game enveloping its player in its world (something the point-and-click game is incredibly good at), whilst adding a real social relevance to the genre? I'm aware that the 'gritty re-boot' is something of a cliché in art at the moment, but the way I buy into the characters and worlds of the point-and-click games I grew up with is, in my opinion, unparalleled in gaming. The disappointments of broken immersion could largely be addressed by its cherished tradition, creating a level of real-world relevancy missing from an often unfairly maligned artform.
Mike Midgley

I would love to see a level of moral ambiguity and social conscience that a lot of independent game developers have carefully been exploring



Mike Midgley ponders what a point-and-click approach could bring to the narrative of the *Mass Effect* universe

The traditional point-and-click adventure is still with us, of course, as the recent *Gray Matter* demonstrates, but you've proposed some interesting avenues for exploration. At the same time, you've made us fear a gritty reboot of *Monkey Island*, with Guybrush as a goth and LeChuck a skull-faced pirate back from the dead… Oh.

Having been the proud owner of an iPhone, a 3G and a 3GS (an ill-considered 24 month contract has prevented me from adding '4' to that list), I've amassed a huge collection of apps, a great many of which are games, from mainstays like *Drop7*, *Flight Control* and *Infinity Blade* to the ever-growing list of 59p gambles that sit untouched or forgotten as my attention is spread ever more thinly and my folders become ever more disorganised. My handset CV isn't blind brand loyalty – I don't even own a turtleneck jumper – but simply the result of Apple's excellent provision of games which, up until now, has remained unmatched. But this year, with my upgrade date looming large, the choice isn't so simple thanks to Android's ever-improving range of handsets and Microsoft's new Windows Phone 7.

However, I face a problem. Where

Continued

F

Topic: The Fear Factor

***Dead Space* sits uneasily below my TV at the moment. I played it up until the first save point then promptly left it well alone.**

Part of me is scared. I know it's a scary game, but I can't bring myself to put the disc in the drive.

I had a similar experience with the original *Uncharted* a few years back. Those that have played it will know of the fear and trepidation leading to the generator room and the sequence contained therein. After two attempts I gave up and was too scared to go back to it. That was until I discovered blind firing, but I digress.
Sasukekun

I never finished *Condemned*. It was partly the scary, but also partly the bleakness. It did such a good job with its bleakness that I just didn't feel like being in the game world.

In fact, I'm sure I've posted about this before. Worlds that do bleak and dark and depressing too well don't motivate me to play.
Facewon

I'm sure I mentioned it before, but the menu sound of *Siren: Blood Curse* scared me sufficiently to prevent me playing it for a long time. When I did start playing, I hid in a corner. I think I played for about five minutes, and haven't picked up the courage since.

I'll walk through an old, empty building in the pitch dark, but certain films and games reduce me to a quivering wreck.
adkm1979

***Project Zero/Fatal Frame* makes *Dead Space* look like *Magical Care Bear Adventure 2: Hugpocalypse*.**

It's far and away the scariest game ever released. The developers did an unbelievable job of capturing Japanese horror films in game format.
tigerswiftly

switching to a different manufacturer's phone used to be no more painful than familiarising yourself with a new button layout, blindly navigating another impenetrable OS and losing half your numbers, the smartphone's gaming renaissance has generated non-transferable back catalogues. Despite ever-more-attractive alternatives, the 'hire purchase'-style business model of contract phones makes changing a long-term decision, and I'm not sure I can bring myself to abandon my collection of games, no matter how verdant the grass elsewhere.

It strikes me that this problem is one that has been familiar to console owners for many decades now, usually mitigated by secondary purchases further down the line. But with the average smartphone costing upwards of £500, such a solution will be viable to very few. Moreover, the rapid development of phone hardware, with generations measured in months rather than years, means that maintaining an old handset as a concurrent gaming device will likely limit your experience of the latest titles; indeed, having played *Infinity Blade* on a friend's iPhone 4, it was difficult to return to the 'bog-standard' 3GS version. Looks like I'm going to have to take out three contracts this year, then...
William Kidby

With games like *BreakTheBlocks Full* flying high on the Android Market, we can see why you're considering a non-Apple handset for phone-based gaming. (That was a joke.) Of course, if you're serious about Android gaming, Sony's PlayStation Suite, wrapped in a spanking new NGP, may be your best option. You won't need to shell out for a contract, after all – only a new portable PlayStation device. And that *can't* be as much as £500...

F

Topic: Tiny moments of epiphany
The moments when you realise that gaming can provoke a unique emotional or physical response that's just as valid as a decent book or a film and gives you a warm glow for the future of interactive entertainment.
We've all had them over the years (SHODAN, anyone?), but what were your standouts over the last year?
Droobus

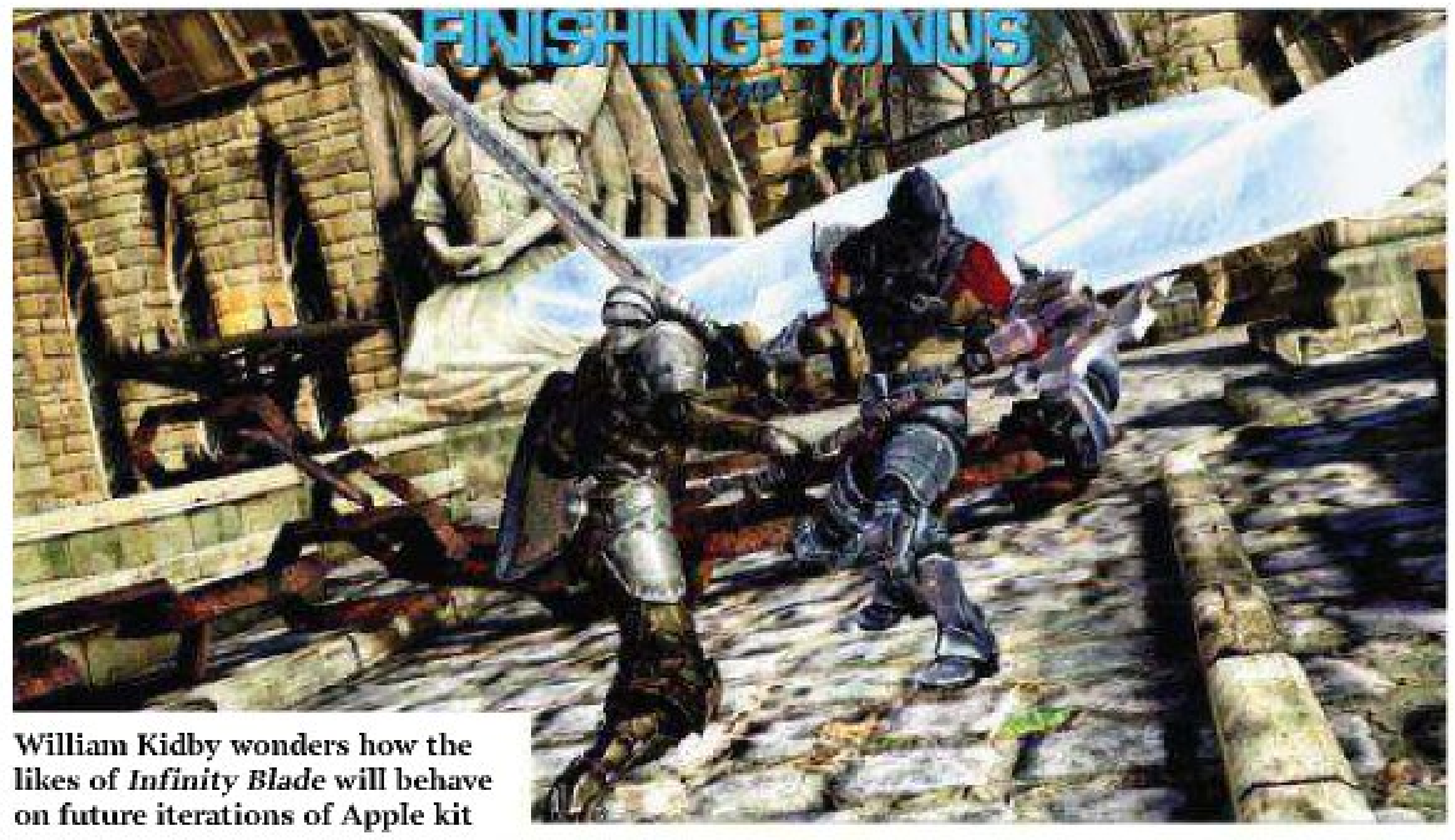
Pulling off a headshot in slo-mo whilst sliding on my backside in *Vanquish*.
Truly, the next gen arrived at that moment.
Tempy

Learning to embrace death in *Demon's Souls* was a huge turning point.
Curtis

The *Mass Effect 2* finale. I had my hand in my mouth throughout the entire cutscene, hoping the characters I'd forged relationships with wouldn't bite the dust. It was utterly nailbiting
Dogfingers

A lot of moments in *Red Dead Redemption* really stuck with me, especially the achievement tied to killing the last buffalo in the west. I like the idea of something meta like an achievement linking to an thoughtful response. Also, the true ending gives me goosebumps, in perhaps a negative, but very real way.
rickjoyce

I, erm... didn't realise you could fast travel in *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* for ages.
JAMMA



William Kidby wonders how the likes of *Infinity Blade* will behave on future iterations of Apple kit

Sometimes I wonder if our industry will ever have the maturity to gain the respect it deserves within popular culture. I have just watched EA's *Dead Space 2* campaign, a series of videos apparently depicting middle-aged women being subjected to intense, graphically violent images under the pretence of participating in market research. The response in all videos is one of shock, disgust, anguish and anxiety, and the tagline is 'Your Mom Hates *Dead Space 2*'.

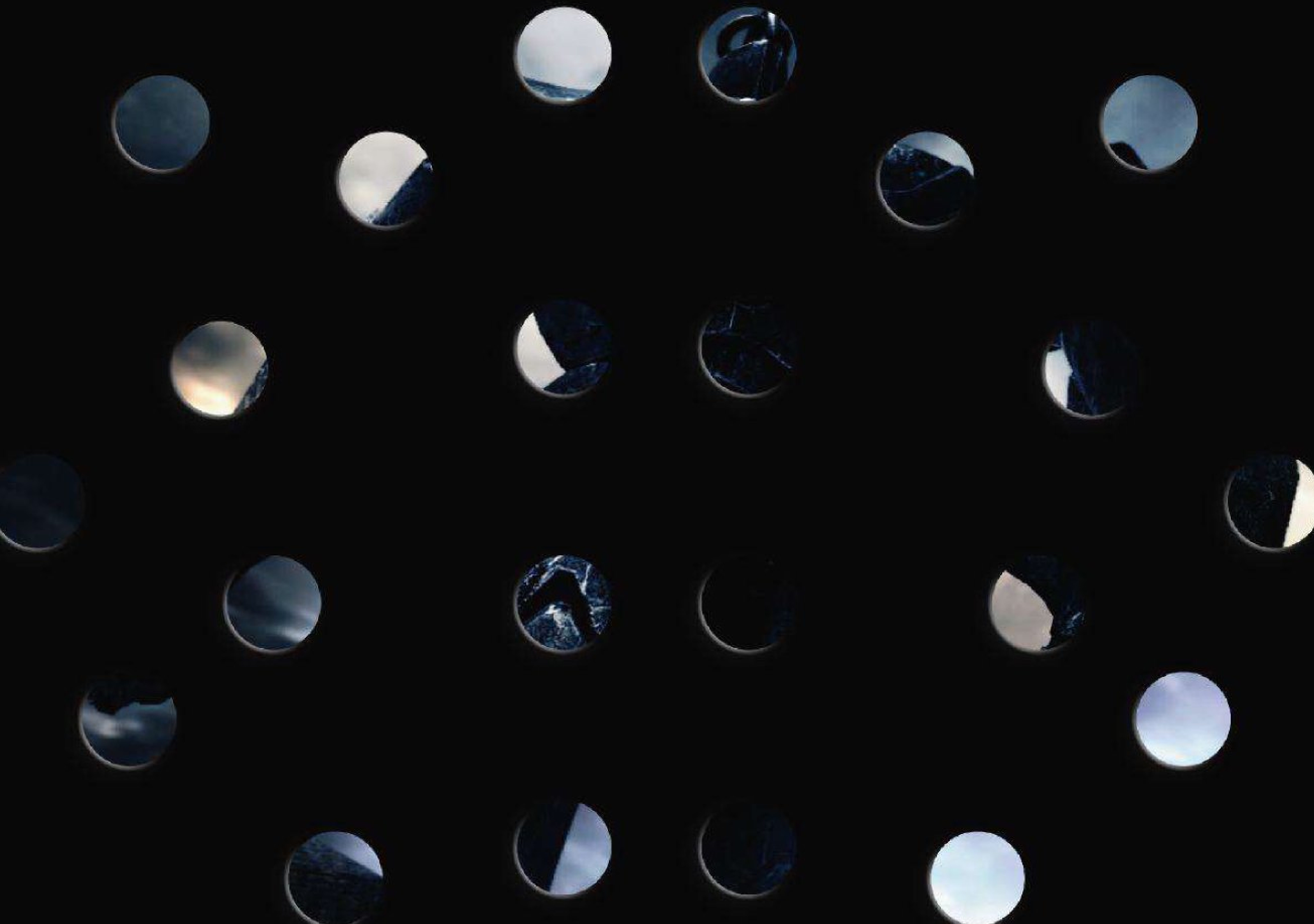
When we talk about kids playing inappropriate games, the developers say they make the games for adults and the publishers say they never target children in their promotions. Tell me, how many adults are excited by the prospect of a game because their mothers don't like it? It's pathetic. The campaign is clearly targeted at children, a fact which is underlined by the first comment on a site hosting the videos, which read: 'mom? more like granny!' Sorry, but if you're in the demographic for which the title is apparently suitable, these woman are definitely mother age, not grandmother age.

Perhaps the women are all actors, but EA want you to believe that they are not, which brings me to my next point. Did they think it was fun to traumatise people with ultra-violent images? Would it be funny to force someone to watch a highlights collection of the Saw franchise's torture scenes? I'd be furious if some marketing team treated my mother like this. Some will argue that this campaign is clever because it reclaims our pastime for the hardcore, reminding the middle-aged women that their Wii Fit fad was just that. But it's no more clever than Fox News dragging out the 'Sex-Box' pun in reference to *Mass Effect* – both attempt to garner publicity through hugely exploitative and disingenuous means.

At a time when our industry is under so much attack – financially with the removal of tax breaks and morally on the issues of irresponsible development concerning addiction and violence – how can we continue to defend it when apparently respectable companies like EA behave as idiotically as this?
Nick Darren

It's been argued that these ads could equally be taken as a parody of modern, face-value attitudes towards screen violence. It is literally a case of shock tactics, though, of a style we haven't seen in game marketing for a while, and brings to mind some of Virgin Interactive's activities during the '90s. We wonder how Warner will promote the new *Mortal Kombat*...

Send us email **(edge@futurenet.com)**, using 'Inbox' as the subject line.
Or send a letter to this address:
Inbox, **Edge**, Future Publishing,
30 Monmouth Street,
Bath BA1 2BW



Edge 226
on sale March 15



EDGE
next-gen.biz
Future
MEDIA WITH PASSION
£4.50
MARCH 2011
03
9 771350 159045